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Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art

Edited by

MARY BITTNER WISEMAN & LIU YUEDI

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BRILL

Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art

Philosophy of History and Culture

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VOLUME 31

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Edited by

Mary Bittner Wiseman
Liu Yuedi



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To Harvey Goldstein and Gui Qingkai

We must create a new roadmap for our entire tradition of thought. The first step is to take stock of our resources: we concede that Occidentalism is now a new tradition, but more importantly that revolutionary war and socialist life have become an even newer tradition. Now add to that the lingering traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and the dazzling new political and economic conditions of the day: From these four sources we must conceive a philosophy of life, a philosophy of politics, and a natural philosophy.

Qiu Zhijie, *Breaking Forecast: 8 Key Figures of China's New Generation Artists* (Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 2009) p. 212.

CONTENTS

Volume Foreword xi

About the Contributors xiii

Introduction
Mary Bittner Wiseman xix

PART ONE

HERE AND NOW

Crisis

Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-garde Art
Mary Bittner Wiseman 3

Political Pop Art and the crisis of originality
Yi Ying 21

Contemporary Art in China: 'Anxiety of Influence' and the Creative Triumph of Cai Guo-Qiang
Laurie Adams 35

Working It Out

Image-Fabrication and Contemporary Photography in China
Wang Chunchen 49

Chinese Contemporary Art: From De-Chineseness to Re-Chineseness
Liu Yuedi 59

Chinese without Chineseness: Chinese Contemporary Art from Cultural Symbol to International Style
Peng Feng 77

Calligraphic Expression and Contemporary Chinese Art: Xu Bing's pioneer experiment
Liu Yuedi 87

Through the Body

The Political Body in Chinese Art
Curtis L. Carter 109

Gendered Bodies in Contemporary Chinese Art
Mary Bittner Wiseman 125

The Second Sex and Contemporary Chinese Women's Art A Case Study on Chen Lingyang's Work
He Jinli 147

Expression Extreme and History Trauma in Women Body Art in China: The Case of He Chengyao
Eva Kit Wah Man 171

PART TWO

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Classical

Metaphysics in Chinese Art
Abraham Kaplan 191

Water and Stone: On the Role of Expression in Chinese Art
Mary Bittner Wiseman 213

Natural Beauty and Literati Strokes: Shi Tao, Merleau-Ponty and the Practice of Painting
David A. Brubaker 247

Paths to the Middle: A Tentative Theory for Chinese Contemporary Art
Peng Feng 271

Recent History

Current State of Chinese Art
Wang Chunchen 283

Avant-garde in Chinese Art
Curtis L. Carter 295

Post-colonial and Contemporary Art Trends in Taiwan
Pan Fan 321

Experimental Painting and Painting Theories in Colonial Hong Kong (1940-1980): Reflections on Cultural Identity
Eva Kit Wah Man 333

East and West

The Shape of Artistic Pasts: East and West
Arthur C. Danto 353

How to Misunderstand Chinese Art: Seven Examples
David Carrier 369

Art and Globalization: Then and Now
Noel Carroll 377

Concept, Body and Nature: After the End of Art and the Rebirth of Chinese Aesthetics
Liu Yuedi 393

Index 411

Illustrations

VOLUME FOREWORD

Mary Wiseman's and Liu Yuedi's timely collection is a philosophical and cultural goldmine. It makes a significant contribution to the study of contemporary Chinese culture, its cross-cultural influences, and to the philosophical understanding of its meaning. Authored by both Chinese and Anglo-American philosophers and art historians, it is the first collection of its kind on the art of the Chinese avant-garde. It is a notable achievement. As such, this volume is a welcome addition to Brill's Series on the Philosophy of History and Culture.

Michael Krausz, Series Editor, *Philosophy of History and Culture*
Bryn Mawr College, USA

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

LAURIE ADAMS is a professor of art history at John Jay College, CUNY who specializes in the Italian Renaissance, art and psychoanalysis, and methodology. She has published, among other works, *A History of Western Art; Art across Time; Italian Renaissance Art; World Views: Topics in Non-Western Art; the Methodologies of Art;* and *Art and Psychoanalysis*. She is the editor of the quarterly journal *Source: Notes in the History of Art* and is a psychoanalyst in private practice.

DAVID A. BRUBAKER lectures in aesthetics and ethics at the University of New Haven. He is the author of articles and book chapters on painting, ethics, architecture, film, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Nishida Kitaro. He is at work on "Aesthetic Creativity and *Qi* in *the Zhongyong: Extensiveness of Field and Limits of Pragmatism*." A Ph. D. in the philosophy of art from the University of Illinois at Chicago and an M.F.A. in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he is active as a painter and printmaker and studies Chinese brush painting with Chien Fei Chiang.

DAVID CARRIER is Champney Family Professor of Philosophy at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Institute of Art. Among his books are *Artwriting* (1987), *Principles of Art History Writing* (1991), and *Writing about Visual Art* (2003). His most recent are *A World Art History and its Objects* (University Park and London, 2008) and *Proust/Warhol: Analytical Philosophy of Art* (Peter Lang, 2008). His essay was given as a public lecture while he was teaching at the Academy of Art and Design, Tsinghua University and the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing

NOEL CARROLL is distinguished professor of philosophy at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His most recent books are *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (2008) and *On Criticism* (*Thinking in Action*)(2009).

CURTIS L. CARTER is professor of aesthetics at Marquette University, whose Haggerty Museum of Art he founded in 1984 and directed until 2007. An international curator of the Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art, he is the president of the International Association of Aesthetics. He was president of Dance Perspectives Foundation from 1988 to 1998 and executive director and secretary-treasurer of the American Society for Aesthetics from1996 to 2006. He guest edited and contributed to *Art and Social Change, IAA Yearbook* (2009). His publications include essays on Chinese contemporary art, the history of contemporary aesthetics, recent artists, and include "Cultural Identity of Art Works," "Nelson Goodman: A Philosopher's Approach to Performance," "Hegel and Danto on the End of Art." Exhibitions he has curated include *Wifredo Lam: in North America* (2007); *Keith Haring: Il Murale di Milwaukee* (2007); *Faces of Modern Dance: Barbara Morgan Photographs* (2004); *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* (2002).

ARTHUR C. DANTO is Johnsonian Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia University and art critic for the *Nation* from1984 to 2009. He is author most recently of *Andy Warhol (Icons of America).*

HE JINLI is assistant professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas teaching Chinese art history, Chinese philosophy, Chinese civilization and Chinese literature. She got her Ph.D. at Peking University in 2004 and was a post-doctoral fellow in the Academy of Arts at Tsinghua University from 2004 to 2007. Her project was "The Idea of Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Art." She has published twelve articles and 2 chapters of books on Wang Guowei and Chinese art, and has translated more than ten articles and 3 books on Chinese philosophy, literature, and comparative philosophy/literature/art.

ABRAHAM KAPLAN (1918–1993), born the son of a rabbi in Odessa, Ukraine, was professor of philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles for almost 20 years and in 1978 moved to the University of Haifa in Israel. Best known for being the first philosopher to examine the behavioral sciences systematically in his book *The Conduct of Inquiry* (1964); his last book was *In Pursuit of Wisdom: the Scope of Philosophy* (1977). He traveled to India and Japan to study their culture and beliefs.

LIU YUEDI is Associate Professor in the Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Assistant General-Secretary of Chinese Society for Aesthetics; and Executive Main-Editor of *The Journal of Aesthetics*. His recent books include *The History of Analytic Aesthetics* (2009); *The History of Visual Aesthetics* (2008); *Living Aesthetics and Art Experience* (2007); *After the End of Art: An Aesthetic Rethinking of Art's Duration* (2006); *Performing Life Aesthetics: Critical Modernity and Reconstruction of Aesthetics* (2005); *Polyphonic Cultures: A Study on the Changing of Chinese Contemporary Cultures in Market Society* with Wang Nanshi (2002). He edited *Interviews with International Aestheticians* (2010) and *Cultural Hegemony* (2005) and translated Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (2010) and Arnold Berleant, ed. *Environment and the Arts* (2007).

EVA KIT WAH MAN is a professor in the Humanities Program of Hong Kong Baptist University. Her academic research areas include comparative aesthetics, neo-Confucian philosophy, feminist aesthetics, gender studies and cultural studies. She has published journal articles, creative prose writings, and academic books in philosophy and aesthetics. In 2004, she was a Fulbright Scholar at U. C. Berkeley and is a life fellow of Clare Hall College, Cambridge University, UK. She was appointed the Association of Marquette University Women Chair at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 2009-2010. Most recently she co-edited *Contemporary Asian Modernities: Transnationality, Interculturality and Hybridity* (Peter Lang, 2010).

PAN FAN teaches in the Graduate School of Art and Science of Fo Guang University, the art department of National Taiwan Normal University, and Taipei National University of the Arts. He graduated from the Chinese Culture University, Taiwan and has an M.A. from Kobe University in Japan and a Ph. D. from Osaka University in Japan. He has a DEA Certificate from the University of Paris where he is a doctoral candidate. His publications include "Paintings of Classicism and Romanticism;" "Alphonse Mucha;" "Paris La Ville Lumiere;" "Paintings of Realism and the Barbizon School;" "Imaginary Ink Paintings" in the Taiwan Modern Art Series. He has translated texts from Japanese, German, and French into Chinese and edited "Guide to Reading Rousseau's *Social Contract*;" "Greek Tragic Theater and *Alcestis*;" and "Impressionist Paintings."

PENG FENG is professor of aesthetics in the Center for Aesthetics and Aesthetic Education at Peking University and associate professor of art theory in the School of Arts at Peking University. He has published *The Return of Beauty: 11 Issues in Contemporary Aesthetics* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009); *Importation and Transfiguration: Western Aesthetics in China* (Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 2006); *Western Aesthetics and Art* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005); *Perfect Nature* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005); *Introduction to Aesthetics* (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2004); *A Study of Uplifting: An Aesthetic Interpretation of Chinese Culture* (Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Press, 2003). His translations include Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2002) and Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009).

WANG CHUNCHEN, born in Xuanhua, Hebei Province, is an art critic with a Ph.D. in Art History from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he is associate professor and curator at its Art Museum. He is the executive editor-in-chief of *Journal of University and Art Museums*. Author of essays of art criticism, he has curated exhibitions in China and abroad, in London, New York, Seoul, and Hong Kong. His research interests lie in the methodology of art history and contemporary art theory and criticism. He won the Art Critic Award of the 2009 Contemporary Chinese Art Awards for his book *Art Intervenes in Society*. His publications include translations of Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*; Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*; Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*; Nigel Wentworth, *The Phenomenology of Painting*; Kemal and Gaskell, eds. *Language of Art History*, Terry Barrett, *Interpreting Art*; and Simon Leung and Zoya Kocur, *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*.

MARY BITTNER WISEMAN is Professor Emerita of Philosophy and Comparative Literature at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Author of *The Ecstases of Roland Barthes* (Routledge, 1989) she has published in ethics, aesthetics, and feminism. She has served two terms as trustee of the American Society for Aesthetics and is on the editorial board of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

YI YING, born Zhijiang County in Hunan Province, is an art historian and art critic. He studied in the Department of Fine Arts at Hunan Normal University and the Art History Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), where he received the degree of Master of Arts. Currently a professor and doctoral tutor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, he is the director of the CAFA Journal, editorial director of *Art Studies*, and editor-in-chief of *World Art Magazine*. Major works include *School's Twilight* (Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House); *Front Side* (Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House); *Ode to the mundane from the heroic world* (Chinese People's University Press); *World Art Collection: 20th Century Western Art* (Chinese People's University Press); *The Selected Works of World Art,* 4 vols. (Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House); and *Selected Works of Contemporary Western Art Criticism*, 2 vols. (Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House). His main translations are Michael Ann Holly, *Panovsky and the Base of Art History* (Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House) and Kenneth Clark, *Art and Civilization—Cultural History of European Art* (Oriental Publishing Center).

INTRODUCTION

Mary Bittner Wiseman

A little more than three decades have gone by since Deng Xiaoping opened China's doors to the capital and culture of the west. In its wake have come changes not unlike those that occurred elsewhere in the world in the1960s: the anti-establishment social turmoil in the United States and the moves that won independence for two thirds of the European colonies in Africa. The west bore witness to another revolution, a revolution in art, when modernism's insistence on art's divorce from the world and the lives of those who walk its stage was challenged. Postmodernism rejected modernism's conceit, which was not unlike Mao's, that it was the final act in the ordered march of art history and needed no longer to take directions from the past. The Chinese versions of the social and political changes of the 1960s are distinctive in that it was the People's Republic of China (PRC), not those disaffected with it, that initiated them, keeping apace with what the electronic and information revolutions have wrought, that is, globalization. The revolution in art, however, was decidedly not initiated by the PRC but by artists no longer moored in the Soviet style realism of the immediate past, no longer convinced that Maoism was the fulfillment of history.

With the classical tradition not ready at hand because it had been denounced, and many of its works destroyed, during the Cultural Revolution, artists in the new China began to ask themselves what art is and what objects or events are art. They began also to ask what it is to be Chinese in a China no longer revolutionary and in a world whose economy and art are become increasingly global. They used their art to work through these questions and became an avant-garde in the process, one that threatens to undermine our ideas about art and Chineseness. The American art critic Barbara Pollack got it right when she wrote in *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China* (Timezone 8, 2010) that:

> It became clear from my trips to China that a lot of people were banking on the belief that this will be the place where the art movements of

> the 21st century will be launched. I came to believe that some sort of future of the art world will undoubtedly take place in China, though it may look quite different from our current image of an art world or of anything Chinese. (20-21)

The job of art criticism and its older cousin, the philosophy of art, is to midwife the paradigm shift that is taking place in China in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Two virtues of this volume are that it is the first collection of articles by philosophers on the art of the Chinese avant-garde, and it is a collection by both Chinese and American philosophers and art historians. Of the fifteen authors, eleven are philosophers and four art historians, and eight are American and seven Chinese. Several conversations are going on at the same time, one between philosophy and art history and criticism and another between the Chinese and American thinkers. And between and behind their separate voices is always the new art, in whose service these articles are written. The United States' introduction to the Chinese art scene came in 1998 when *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* was exhibited in San Francisco and New York. It was followed by exhibitions such as *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (2004 – 2006); *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* (2005 – 2006); and, in the United Kingdom, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (2007), in which there was no art made before 2000. The art had wider circulation abroad than it did in China and was recognized on the world stage before it was given a proper reception in its own land. Indeed, the first collector of contemporary Chinese art was a Swedish businessman, later Sweden's ambassador to China, Uli Sigg, who, in 1998, established the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards.

The subjects that come up in these conversations between denizens of the Chinese and western art worlds are those set both by tensions between the global and the local and by those between China's classical and revolutionary traditions, on the one hand, and modernism and postmodernism, on the other. The first is a matter of geography (here and there), the second, of history (now and then). Accordingly, the volume has two parts: Here and Now, and History and Geography.

Traditions and Modernisms

China, in the face of the changes rung by its embrace of capitalism, is remapping its relation to the rest of the world and to both its recent

and imperial past whose customs, culture, habits, and ideas comprised the Four Olds whose destruction was one of the goals of the Cultural Revolution as Mao strove to free the People's Republic of China of the past. Although each era constructs the past in its own image and then either develops, criticizes, or transcends it, this has to be done in the face of material things that persist and the effects of time on the land and the plants and animals it supports. Of these one can hardly be free.

The material past is there in the *gunpowder* discovered around 850 CE (Tang Dynasty) and used by Cai Guo-Qiang for his paintings and explosion events. It is there too in the *incense* used in China in ancestor worship and Buddhist rituals at least since the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) and whose ashes Zhang Huan collects from a temple in Shanghai to use in his work. The recent past is present in the *bronze fragments* of Buddha statues smashed in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution and gathered up by Zhang to be turned into large statues of body parts, a foot, an arm, a head, and in the Ground Zero *dust* from the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 spread over the floor of a gallery in Cardiff, Wales by Xu Bing. In the dust was written a line from an early Zen poem: "As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust collect itself?"

Current Chinese artists do not want to put the *material* past behind them, because matter, like gesture, has a stubborn truth. Gunpowder and incense carry with them the memory of their presence in ancient China: the pieces of bronze had been statues of Buddha, the ash is the residue of Buddhist temple offerings, and the dust, residue of the destruction of the Twin Towers. These materials carry their stories with them. Does the material significance of these artists' work show it to belong to postmodernism? Yes and no. Yes, insofar as their work refers outside itself as modernist work does not, and no, insofar as the art that came before it was Socialist Realism—which did refer to the people and their lives—not modernism. The Chinese artists' relation to their art historical past is more complex than that of western artists.

Interlude

We will turn in a moment to the effects of globalization on the current art scene in China and questions it raises about wherein Chinese-ness lies. But look now at the title of this book, *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art,* and the image on the cover, *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains, No. 32.*

When I wrote the title article four years ago, the beliefs being subverted by the new art from China were somewhat different than they are now, so fast is the art scene changing. Then they were that the new social spaces were hospitable, the discourses of socialism and capitalism compatible, and western art theory adequate to the new Chinese art. The art showed its viewers the fragility of the beliefs as it conveyed some sense of *what it is like* to live through the changes taking place in China: the social worlds were unstable and the languages of an authoritarian government and free-wheeling capitalism hard to reconcile. By 2011, the scene has changed and the subversions are more likely to be of the idea that moral and ontological theories that prevailed in imperial China no longer speak to the present or that the revolutionary imperative to serve the people can no longer be heard. The sheer energy and imaginative power of the work being made by Chinese artists are subverting many of the ideas about art in terms of which critics, western and Chinese alike, tend to see the experimental art being made by Chinese artists now.

This brings us to the cover image, *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains, No. 32* (2010, ash on linen, 160 cm x 250 cm) from an exhibition of thirty-seven tiger paintings at Pace Beijing in the summer of 2010. Mountains and rivers, stone and water, bone and blood, stillness and motion, silence and sound, the pairs have a place in the Chinese world view comparable to that of mind and body, culture and nature, same and other, and the like in western metaphysics. The south China tiger is the evolutionary antecedent of the eight species, three now extinct, of the world's tigers. In 1900 there were one hundred thousand tigers in the wild, now there are between five and six thousand. The Chinese tiger is the most rare; no more than thirty or forty are left. Zhang has saved thirty-seven of them on his canvases, saved them from the extinction that threatens because tiger parts are essential ingredients in traditional Chinese medicine. Like the lion in the west, the tiger in China is the king of animals: the three horizontal stripes that cross the vertical in the Chinese character for 'king' mimic the stripes on the tiger's back. Were the tiger free of predators he could return to the mountains of which he would, then, be king. In the painting we chose, bare branches of the winter trees mime the tiger's stripes and the tiger seems to be walking out of the canvas, on his way to mountains.

The painting alludes to the history and current plight of the tiger, to nature and its place in the Chinese worldview, and, thanks to the

incense ashes from which it is made, to Buddhist ritual. Chinese religion and philosophy are here. The thirty-seven paintings are Zhang's identification of himself, and us, with the tiger and a plea for its survival that is at the same time a plea for ours, a plea that we stop our predation of the natural world and instead live in harmony with it. Fully to do this is to revise the western view of nature as something to be controlled and of capital, the only nonliving thing that can reproduce itself, as that of which there can never be enough.

This is art addressing the world as directly as political tracts and advertisements do. The immediate address is a legacy of Mao, who insisted that art was to, for, and about the people. The difference is that the people whom this art addresses are, like Zhang Huan's tiger, free of the necessity to believe, do, read, and think only what the leaders of the People's Republic allow.

Global and Local

Global no longer means western, if ever it did. The issue for the Chinese artists raised by the phenomenon of globalization is this: how Chinese is their art since much of it is genuinely international in being compatible with works in other cultures and readily engaged by viewers who belong to those cultures. The artists who were abroad for the last several decades, some left after the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, made work that was inevitably affected by their expatriation. As it became known and appreciated in the west, their art opened western eyes to the possibility of an art that did not follow the narrative line—however tangled the line might have become in its rejections and revisions of what went before—of western modernism. The 1998 appearance of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* came at a time when the art world in the west was ready for an art that invited its viewer to think and feel and dream, as the art being made in the west no longer did.

This volume comes at a time when the art philosophical and historical worlds are following the well-known expatriate artists Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, and Zhang Huan (two of whom have returned to China) and many, many others in reclaiming Chinese theories of art so that they, the theorists, can engage the new art and lay out its presuppositions and implications for an art-interested public. The book begins with my response to the work by Chinese artists shown in the west at the beginning of the new century and ends with my co-editor's

observation that as the boundary between art and everyday life is becoming more and more porous, Chinese aesthetics is being reborn. Between these two articles are eleven more by Chinese authors and ten by Americans.

The Articles

The art historian Yi Ying identifies a crisis of language that began when artists gave up the language of traditional oil painting and came to rely instead on methods of expression from other media—photography, video, digital art—as they appropriated images from traditional paintings. The crisis was that they lost their sensitivity to fresh images. One response to it was Cartoon Art, whose images, which include online game images, are not copies of other images but are expressions of the artists' own ideas. The cartoon world is a virtual, not a real, world. Another response to the crisis was 'bad painting', a mix of contemporary visual experience and the survival experience of returning to nature, life, and body. Another art historian, Wang Chunchen, articulates in detail what Yi Ying had called the image-tide but does not, as Yi does, deplore the loss of sensitivity to fresh images. A step away from the art itself are three accounts: one of the current structure of the government-overseen art world by Wang Chunchen; another of the developments that led up to the current art scene in Taiwan by art historian Pan Fan; and a third on the construction of cultural identity in Hong Kong from 1940 to 1980 by Eva Man.

A further step away from the art and its institutions and recent history in non-mainland China are a trio of essays by two philosophers, Peng Feng and Liu Yuedi. The difference between the thrusts of the first two articles is seen from their titles: Liu's "From De-Chineseness to Re-Chineseness" and Peng's "Chinese without Chineseness." Each author sees art to be moving out of the orbit of the west. Peng identifies an international style fashioned by Xu Bing as he weaves English (and in principle every language) around the unique combination of sight, sound, and significance that is Chinese calligraphy. In his article on calligraphy, Liu notes with approval that Xu Bing returns calligraphy to its role in the art of living and presents calligraphic expression as a new artistic language, but observes also that certain values in calligraphy are lost in its being internationalized. He asks if there is not the danger that Xu Bing's 'make the foreign things serve China' could

be reversed to become 'make Chinese things serve the foreign'. In the final member of the Chinese philosophers' trio, Peng turns from the future of Chinese art theory to Chinese traditional philosophy and claims that the trilogy of Dao (abstract or mental object), Xiang (presence), and Qi (concrete or physical object) can solve analytic philosophy's ontological problem about the status of the art object.

While Peng Feng and Liu Yuedi address the question of Chineseness, two women philosophers, Eva Kit Wah Man and He Jinli, address that of woman-ness. Eva Man shows how a woman artist, He Changyao, used performance art to confront her own pain at the pain inflicted on her mother for having borne her out of wedlock. The performances were acts of defiance and recuperation as well as expressions of her woman pain and her woman-.ness. He Jinli claims that western and Chinese feminism are as far apart as are the conceptual schemes that govern each culture. In the west, woman is defined in opposition to man: she lacks man's power to govern his life by reason (Aristotle) or, lacking a penis, is but a deficient man (Freud). In China, however, woman is understood not to lack what man has but to complement what he is.

And so do seven Chinese thinkers in their twelve articles take on questions about the direction and distinction of the new Chinese art and the effect on it of its global reach. The intimation, ever so subtle, is that in time global might mean Chinese, as early on it was thought to mean western. Look now briefly at eight American thinkers (in eleven articles) addressing themselves to more or less the same questions.

In his article Arthur C. Danto observes that for him modernism began in the west when Japanese prints became objects not of curiosity but of influence. Artists had let themselves be influenced by the prints because they no longer felt they belonged to their own tradition. The central question of modernity, he continues, is what happened to account for western artists' representation of their own past being less relevant for them than the imagined past of other cultures.

This question is, I think, ready of answer for current Chinese artists: what happened was that China opened itself to the protagonist of communism in the cold war, capitalism. In one fell swoop the immediate Maoist past was put out of play as a source of influence, the same Maoist past by which the Chinese classical tradition had been put out of play. What influences were available for the artists of the last decades of the twentieth century? They took Pop art and performance art from the west, but the differences were more significant than the similarities.

The issue was, as the authors in this volume agree, for artists to remain connected to their Chinese roots while they created art that could be appreciated in what Noel Carroll characterizes as a unified transnational art institution, also known as the global art world.

Carroll disagrees with Danto about the importance of the influence of Japanese prints saying that their influence was causal but always conceived as external to the tradition. His criteria for an art world in which the influence of one culture upon another would be internal are that there be a network of coordinated venues, a world-traveling group of curators, preferred productive idioms, various shared artistic and critical discourses. This is possible because of the exploding number of channels of communication, media that can be seen simultaneously the world over, and the ease and speed of transportation. The upshot of this is that there might no longer be anything other, outside, foreign, or exotic. The undesirability of this possibility, the absence of difference, leads the Chinese artist today to ask in what her Chinese identity consists and to explore and exploit this question in her art. I think it is resistance to the flattening of the art world (Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat*: *A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, 2007) that has artists want to tie art down to their own world and their lives. As though in anticipation of this impulse, Danto said in 1993, when his article was first published, that when one seeks deeper connection between art and life, modernism is over, and the need for a philosophy of art under which art is responsive to human ends becomes a priority.

This, I submit, is what we are seeing in the current art world, especially from those artists who spent time abroad in the 1980s and 1990s. In those decades, the social spaces and available discourses in China were subject to the tumult unleashed when capitalism joined communism and competition joined cooperation in what Nietzsche called the dark workshop where values were being alchemically transformed into their opposites. Artists, in the meantime, went underground to where matter and gesture reign, to where Aristotle's material and efficient causes reign, leaving his formal and final causes to readjust themselves through China's political and economic institutions. What the artists did there, in the service of intuition, imagination, and instinct, with only themselves and the language-absent world, was to make art. And through their making art, what art is and what it is to be Chinese began to reveal itself.

Wittgenstein knew that to ask what art is, to ask for a definition, is to get no answer. What one should do instead, he said, is to see how the word 'art' is used. But when the word is put into free play, as it was in the 1980s, its meandering path reveals little. Instead one should watch, so far as one can, the art-making process. This reaches deeper than language, deeper than any theory of art, deeper than much of anything but the near primitive encounter of a human being with the stuff at her disposal to say something that could otherwise not be said. Whatever ends up being the subject of the art, and whatever ends up being said about it, it is, finally, about being human in a material world. This is why a philosophy of art responsive to human ends is a priority.

An American art historian, Laurie Adams, sees the history of western influence on the art of China and the political control exercised by the government as inhibiting the freedom of artists in China really to be contemporary. This makes the genius of Cai Gu-Qiang seen in his 2008 Guggenheim Museum exhibition all the more noteworthy. She identifies his genius as lying in his ability to navigate between oppositions, control contrasts, and emerge with new creative expressions, where the discovery of these is the charge of Chinese artists in this new century.

The other American authors are all philosophers. Curtis Carter in "Avant-garde in Chinese Art," working with a broader sense of the avant-garde than that of critics who associate it solely with modernism, notes that it has been an important part of Chinese art history from the nineteenth century, its spirit apparent in any challenge to traditional predecessors. In particular, the introduction of western art that then merged with elements of Chinese art in the early twentieth century constituted a radical shift in what can be considered art. After 1980 there was both a search for transnational issues and a greater focus on the artist's self identity as a ground for a new art. As the PRC recognized the importance of art for the Chinese economy, artists were given increased freedom to experiment and, rearmed with tools of western and traditional Chinese art, are ready to think of Chinese art in new ways.

David Carrier, speaking not of two hundred years as Carter was, but of his semester teaching in China, describes how his expectation that because Chinese artists work and exhibit in the west, the two traditions are close enough to be mutually accessible was undone. There is, that is to say, little reason to think the two traditions are comprehensible to each other since classical Chinese theory has had no influence

on western theory and no contemporary Chinese theory is known in the west. His experience with seven artists whose work he saw, and some of whom he interviewed, showed him how easy it is to misunderstand a distant culture. When he did achieve cross-cultural understanding, he said it felt miraculous because in the experience, he became another, more than himself. When the bar for understanding the art of another culture is set this high, interpretive failure is all too likely, and Carrier concludes, Socrates-like, that the longer he was there the more of his ideas about Chinese art he had to give up.

In "Water and Stone" I argue that the fifth century "Six Principles of Chinese Painting" (Hsieh Ho) and seventeenth century "An Expressionist Credo" (Shih Tao) apply with lightening ease and serve to explain much contemporary art because of the quality of the materialism manifest in it. My extended examples are the water that is the subject of David Clarke's 2006 essay, "The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art," and a 2007 exhibition in the United Kingdom, "The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China."

Abraham Kaplan details Chinese metaphysics in an article that, together with "Water and Stone," sets the stage for David A. Brubaker's recuperation of five features of the practice of literati painting adumbrated by Shih Tao. He does this through the work of Merleau-Ponty and his own practice as a painter. Similarly, the matter that plays a role in "Water and Stone," in the guise of matter-made-human, sets the stage for articles about representations and use of the human body in current Chinese art.

Curtis L. Carter writes on representations of the human figure and on calligraphy as exercises of political power. Calligraphy is linked to the body in that the writer uses his entire body to express his spirit in the practice of calligraphy; it is believed to reveal the intent and character of the person writing. Therefore, the act of writing functions, as does the body, as a gateway to the writer's soul. Not until the twentieth century does the human body become a potent symbol of political power. Both the end of imperial power in 1911 that called for a new art of the people and influence from the west led many to adopt western figurative art; the figure is prominent in Mao-era art. In post-Mao art the body has a different role. Political leaders in the paintings of Ma Baozhong, for example, become characters in a theatrical drama, their roles fictionalized and their power diffused.

The body in recent art assumes roles that are not political. In "Gendered Bodies" I identify a difference in the way male and female

bodies are used in art. Since what it is to be woman in China is not simply to lack the traits constitutive of being a man, gender difference does not make so deep a cut in the conceptual schemes in Chinese thought as it does in the west. The female body is not identified or valued in art as an object of male desire but as the site and possibility of its flowering, while the male body is typically presented as marked in some unusual way or performing some unusual action. Neither is identified as an object worthy of respect or interest for its own sake as it can be in the art of the west. There is no genre of the nude in China. While the body in the west is used as a symbol of ideal form, human-made-ideal, the body in China, matter-made-human, is the site through which pulses the same energy that flows through the earth and the sky.

This summary of articles ends, then, with a bow to the metaphysics of Chinese art, a place to which we have been taken by artists to whom westerners have access, Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, and Zhang Huan.

I thank Susan Feagin, Laurie Adams, Josh Welber, and Michael Krausz for pointing me in the direction of this book and my husband, Harvey Goldstein, without whose help, and love, the book would not have been finished.

PART ONE

HERE AND NOW

SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES IN CHINESE AVANT-GARDE ART*

Mary Bittner Wiseman

The following review of an underground exhibition held alongside the Shanghai Biennale 2000, *After Exoticism—review of art festival, Shanghai, China*, appeared in the July 2001 issue of *Art in America*:

> Social realism, which was still acknowledged in the modern portion of the Guggenheim Museum's "China, 5,000 Years" exhibition in 1998, has vanished without a trace … [China] essentially skipped the stage of modernist formalism, moving in two Great Leaps, so to speak, from traditional ink painting to Socialist Realism to postmodern eclecticism … The urge for practitioners to "catch up" with the West and to stand out from the overwhelming competition leads many to a strategy of shock. If one "Fuck Off" artist uses a dead baby (Sun Yuan in *Honey*, 1999, or Zhu Yu in *Eating People*, 2000), the next, it seems, must use two (Peng Yu [and Sun Yuan] in *Link of the Body).*
>
> After decades of censorship, China's young talents now seem obsessed with testing the limits of tolerance. How much provocation will the government permit? When will viewers begin to react with physical disgust or moral outrage? … These "progressives" are remarkably like avant-garde artists everywhere … Nothing is more uniform, it seems, than art-world non-conformity.[1]

It is true that non-conformity is a mark of the avant-garde, but it can be argued, *pace* this review, that to read the work of Chinese nonconforming artists at the turn of the twenty-first century as doing nothing but testing the limits of tolerance is to do the art an injustice and to deprive oneself of a lesson on the possible functions and, hence, the nature of art. The evidence for this can be found by looking at the art of the Chinese avant-garde as a series of subversions of the claims of certain beliefs to be true. The first subversion is of the presumption

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[1] Richard Vine, "The Report from Shanghai: After Exoticism," *Art in America* 89 (2001), 30-39, quotation is from p. 39.

that a communist government with a capitalist economy can carve out a social space in which people can be themselves; the second, that the discourses in place in China are interpretable; and the third, that Western conceptions of art, supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, can be adequate to China at the turn of the new century.

This way of looking paves the way to an answer to the question of whether there are concepts specific to a non-western aesthetics that have been omitted or marginalized in the west and would, were they to enter its critical discourse, enrich specific concepts in western aesthetics and philosophies of art. More precisely, the question is whether there are traits or concepts present in the one art and absent from the other that are so deeply entrenched as not to be able to leave their context in order to enter the critical discourse of the west. An answer to this requires the separation out of the distinctly non-western and the transposition of what is separated out to western criticism.

In the fast-moving history of post-Cultural Revolution art in China there was a further forward leap from traditional ink painting to postmodern eclecticism not mentioned in the review in *Art in America*: from Social Realism to Political Pop, whose style, though not its content, was indebted to the art of the 1960s in the west. Political Pop performed the first of the three subversions through which the course of recent Chinese art can be charted. One reason to see the art as subversion is to discover what in it is global and what local. 'Global' is here taken to apply to those activities or genres that can shake free of their native soil and be transported to almost anywhere, practices such as the manufacture of clothes for American companies and the analysis of radiological scans from American hospitals that have moved to China and to India, respectively, and genres such as the installations and performance art that have journeyed from New York to Beijing. A difference between the economic and aesthetic cases leads to a distinction between the global and the local: something is global when it is unmarked by its travels and local when it bears the imprint of the place from which it has traveled. For example, the 'Made in China' tag is the only evidence that many articles of clothing designed and sold by American companies are not of American manufacture. The clothing could have been made anywhere, and aside from the tag there is no sign of its having come from China. The installations and performance art made by artists of the Chinese avant-garde, however, are marked by the Chinese present and past, and their origin in the West pales in

the face of their Chinese-ness. The imported genres themselves can become so familiar as to lose their outsider-ness and come to be thought of as local or homegrown.

China did skip the modernist formalism that reigned in the west throughout the period bracketed by the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. An art conceived as significant form, an art whose content was excoriated for distracting the viewer from the plastic values whose creation is art's purpose, is a luxury Chinese artists can not afford. The formalist creates forms free of content, message, or meaning of any sort, forms the mere perception of which pleases. Chinese avant-garde artists, on the other hand, perform ritualistic erasures of systems of intelligibility like language and art. In this activity lies the second subversion. It is performed for at least two different sorts of reasons. One is skepticism or cynicism or despair about, finally, the intelligibility of extant languages and arts. The other is the performance of an intellectual exercise: to find out how much content or meaning one can take away and still have anything that does more than merely please. The exercise includes an experiment in imagination: should the erasures succeed and the world be reduced to nothing but empty forms, would the artist's presence, his or her body and its gestures, be enough to remake the world? The answer from China today is yes.

Part of what is distinctive about the work of the Chinese avant-garde is its subject matter and, most important, the attitude the artist takes toward it. The subject matter of the most recent art is precisely the means through which the avant-garde performs its third subversion. The distinctiveness, the otherness, led the United Kingdom's International Trade Commission to find a television program to have contained material that constituted an offence against good taste and decency, an offence to public feeling.[2] Forty-two viewers had objected to two pieces of performance art shown on a Channel 4 broadcast of *Beijing Swings* on January 2, 2003 at 11:05 pm. One was Zhu *Yu's Eating People*, which contained a photograph of the artist eating the body of a dead baby and the other, Peng Yu and Sun Yuan's *Link of the*

[2] The International Trade Commission (ITC) is an 'independent' quasi-judicial federal agency that advises the legislative and executive branches of government that found Channel 4 in breach of §1.1 of its Programme Code, available at http://www.ofcom.org.uk/.../complaints_reports/programme_complaints/ show_complaint.asp-prog_complaint_id=596.html.

Body in which "the dead bodies of a pair of Siamese twins were smeared with the artists' blood."[3]

The fact that *Link of the Body* was found to offend good taste and decency in Britain and yet won for its artists the 2002 young artist prize in the Contemporary Chinese Art Awards highlights one difference between the global and the local, the regional, the native, what cannot be exported or shaken off.[4] *Link of the Body* is weakly global in its genre because performance art originated in the West, but the attitudes, ideas, and impulses it expresses are local. Although a British commission found the broadcast of pictures of the work to offend public decency, the Chinese government apparently did not: it did not interfere with the underground exhibition alternate to the Shanghai Biennale 2000 that included *Link of the Body*. This leads to the thought that the avant-garde in the twenty-first century is speaking to something distinctively Chinese and that global audiences welcome this art for its difference, its Chinese-ness, but only so long as the expressed attitudes towards the subject matter does not offend their own local codes of what is acceptable. What the Chinese-ness consists in must, of course, be adumbrated.

The mainland Chinese are living through the re-inscription within their culture of the opposing sides of the Cold War that dominated the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the Chinese counterparts of the series of upheavals that caused the breakup of the Soviet Union and its satellites failed to bring about a similar effect, the fall of communism, when they culminated in the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The government forcefully suppressed them, and the co-existence of the communist government and its capitalist economy still defines the new China. The people have to come to terms not only with the prima facie contradiction between the virtual obliteration of the idea of the individual under communism and the self-promotion of the individual under capitalism, but also with the change from Mao's prohibition of any commerce with the bourgeoisie to his successor Deng Xiaoping's invitation to foreign investors. This all takes place against the backdrop of the old China that persists despite efforts Mao made to cast it into shadow.

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[3] From the report of the above ITC ruling.

[4] Contemporary Chinese Art Awards (CCAA) is an award-granting foundation established in 1998 by the Swiss collector and ambassador to China, Uli Siggs. The CCAA are the only such awards in China.

Imagine an art that is refashioning itself in a world that has in its last decades seen the end of communism in the Soviet Union and central Europe, the electronic revolution and the subsequent information explosion, and globalization. Imagine an art whose identity is in flux and whose exposure to the arts and ideas of the West was slight between the inception of communism in China in 1949 and the country's opening itself to the West in the late 1970s. Such is the art of China. Its story shows it to be in the service of what is no longer its primary function in the West: the re-construction of the identity of a people and the re-invention of the idea of art itself. One specific Chinese difference, then, is the role its current art plays in the articulation of what can in China be thought and felt and said. This is the classic role of an avant-garde. The aesthetic avant-garde has been the pride of the West, but its avatars have moved East. The move gives rise to the question of whether and how much this avant-garde is inflected by 'China', by its ancient and its recent history. The question is whether and how what might fall out as distinctly Chinese can assert itself in the presence of the global reach of Western practices.

Installation and performance art abound in the work of these Chinese artists, but they are far from simply copying the West. Evidence for this is the presence of two themes with no obvious counterpart in the West, identified by Norman Bryson in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*.[5] One is the relation of the individual to the social spaces created by the mix of materialism and socialism, spaces identified by Henri Lefebvre as having been produced by social forces as their preconditions and their products.[6] Distinctive of the organization of social space in the People's Republic of China through the mid-1980s was its homogeneity, which the Cultural Revolution sought to further by trying to erase the differences between town and county. On its surface, the space is homogeneous no longer. The other theme specific to the new art is the individual's relation to the languages that articulate and convey meaning.

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[5] Norman Bryson, "The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* catalogue for a 1998-99 exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries in New York (University of California Press, 1998), p. 53.

[6] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

Social spaces and their languages comprise Bryson's list. I have another. On mine are items more nearly primitive, resistant though not immune to the incursion of 'the languages of criticism and the sciences of man'.[7] They are items from a brute and dumb non-signifying nature, not from a nature domesticated in gardens, national parks, wildlife preserves, and landscape paintings. The list includes worms, gunpowder, dust, dead bodies, and blood. Both of us, however, recognize something in the current art that operates at a level below that of ideology, below where communism and capitalism collide. And below what the one U. K. watchdog considered the boundaries of good taste or decency and respect for human dignity.[8]

I. *First subversion—of the presumption that a communist government with a capitalist economy can carve out a social space in which people can be themselves*

Look first at one distinguishing theme to be found in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*: responses to the social spaces created by Chinese communism's embrace of capitalism. It is the material for the first subversion that began soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution and appeared as a local version of Pop Art. Artists in Hangzhou, for example, made a series of installations called *Red Humor* in 1986-87. Wu Shan Zhuan made one in which the walls, ceiling, and floor of a small room were papered with communist slogans, lines from Buddhist texts, advertisements, jokes, the title of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, in a word, the contents of the mind of a mainland Chinese person living in the 1980s. Most of the papers were white with black characters, some few were red, and the whole was splashed with red paint. On the painted red floor were four large white characters spelling out 'No one can

[7] The title is that of a conference at the Johns Hopkins University in 1966 at which contemporary French criticism and theory were introduced to the U.S. academic world.

[8] The claims being made here are not about the whole of the contemporary Chinese art scene, but about art shown in several exhibitions in the United States. Bryson's judgments are based for the most part on the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. Mine are based for the most part on it and two other publications. One is Zhang Zhaohui, ed. *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Xu Bing & Cai Guo-Qiang*, catalogue for an 1998 exhibition at the Art Museum of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2005). The other is Ai Weiwei, ed. *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998-2002* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002).

interpret it,' no one, not Deng or the CEO of MacDonald's. The room is a metaphor for a mind, and the subtext of the installation is that no sense can be made of the contents of a mind full of communist dicta and capitalist slogans. When the room is seen as a metaphor for the culture, the subtext is that its disparate languages and the sayings they license cannot carry meaning because there are no shared meanings through which they can be read together.

Wu Shan Zuan chose the sayings used in *Red Humor* randomly, believing the artist not to be the main factor in the production of art and declaring: "Wu is an example of material. Nothing can escape from being material."[9] And nothing, it seems, can escape being turned into a commodity, a thing that can be traded for money. Indeed, in its January 2006 issue, *Artforum* reported that "it was only two months ago that an individual work by a Chinese contemporary artist surpassed the $1 million mark," and on October 20, 2005 *The New York Times* reported that sales in China's leading auction houses "have risen from less than $100 million in 2000 to about $1 billion in 2003." The growth of the Chinese art market requires its artists to become increasingly subversive if they are to function as a bona fide avant-garde. This is exactly what they have done.

Historical materialism records the history of the conversion of the goods of the earth into materials that will sustain human life. Capitalism is the system through which the goods of the earth are converted into capital, where capital is not what sustains life but what makes more of itself. Uneasy bedfellows, the two materialisms sleep together nonetheless. In the words of the curator of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*: "The mass media's overwhelming of the population with propagandist images (such as Mao's art) or advertisement and entertainment symbols (such as Coca-Cola and Marilyn Monroe) apparently levels the differences between Mao's mass culture and Hollywood."[10]

Political themes from the Cultural Revolution joined Pop Art in a series of oil paintings by Wang Guangyi, one of which, *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola* (1993) (Figure 1), combines the image of three workers lined up side by side with the soft drink logo. Only the heads and raised left arms of the second and third workers can be seen. The

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[9] Wu Shan Zhuan and Inga Svala, "Tourist Information: Alphabetical Aphorisms," a selection of writings distributed by Wu and Red Humor International, 1992-93. Cited in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, p. 159.

[10] Cao Minglu, "From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China," in *Inside Outside: New Chinese Art*, p. 152.

first clutches a red book and all three hold one large fountain pen whose nib lies just above the second C in the white letters 'Coca-Cola' and whose length appears to be the pole of a red flag. If the first C is communism, then the second, the one threatened by the pen's nib, is capitalism. Book and pen replace hammer and sickle. The flag and the back wall, deep yellow on top and red on the bottom, are peppered with ten digit numbers, perhaps identification numbers of some kind, some white, some black. The conjunction of the two reduces the revolutionary workers and the logo of China's most popular company to kitsch, trivializing the ideologies of Maoism and Western economies. To reduce Maoism to kitsch is to subvert its authority over the people's beliefs and values.

Great Castigation: Coca-Cola is nothing more than an exemplification of materialism, historical and consumer, where "nothing can escape being material."[11] Material cannot generate meanings, people do, but not deliberately. Wang Guangyi, like Wu Shan Yuan, belongs to an anti-author movement that holds artists not to be major factors in the production of art, and it is consistent with this movement to hold individuals not to be major factors in the production of language, that is to say, their intentions do not issue in meanings. How, then, does language have the authority it has? What is at issue is the source of meaning, and *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola* says that the discourses of neither communism nor capitalism can authorize a set of shared meanings in a culture that contains both. Bryson suggests that gesture and its repetition, not ideology, is what legitimates discourses. The subversion of the authority of Mao leads straightaway to a crisis of language and to the second subversion performed by conceptual art.

II. *Second subversion—of the presumption that the discourses in place in China are interpretable*

The second theme found to be specific to Chinese art, then, the relation of the individual to language, follows from the first, the relation of the individual to the social spaces that house the former antagonists in the Cold War. *Red Humor* says that the two languages under one roof cannot be interpreted, and *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola* implies that this is because the signifiers of the only possible sources of meaning,

[11] Wu Shan Zhuan and Inga Svala, "Tourist Information: Alphabetical Aphorisms."

the revolution and the market, are empty. Nor can Chinese tradition enter the breach. It and its art are reduced to nothing when made to share its space with the modern art of Europe and America. This is the message of *"A History of Chinese Painting" and "A Concise History of Modern Painting" Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987) by Huang Yong Ping. The work is the pile of paper pulp left over from having washed the two books in a machine for two minutes. Because the two had been torn from their respective Chinese and western contexts and made to share each other's space, the meaning of each was washed away. In the pulp that remains the material identity of each, as well as their meaning, is lost.

Artists are making works that consist, in Bryson's words "in emptying out the semantic dimension of language,"[12] enacting through their art precisely the effects of the contradictions supported by the too rapid reconfigurations of their social spaces. The unsettling of the language-user's identity—revolutionary or bourgeois?—unsettles her relation to language, and she cannot find herself in it. The response of conceptual artists has been to perform and document actions that not only dramatize the crisis of meaning by eviscerating language's semantic content, but also exemplify what is left over and above syntax: gesture, the body's performance of language. To talk, to write, is to do some physical thing. To listen, to read, is to use ears and eyes. And because there can be no private language, silently to think with words requires also being able to use them to talk and to listen, to write and to read.

Two works of performance art in *Inside Out* can be read to say that since power in China seems no longer to reside at the level of the great ideologies, perhaps it lies in a level below them where individuals can act, where they can "intervene and innovate at their own scale and on their own terms."[13] One work is *Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times* (1986/1997) by Qui Zhijie in which the artist does what any student of calligraphy must do and copies again and again a famous fourth century text. The singular difference of Qui's exercise is that he copies the words onto one piece of paper, which eventually becomes an unreadable black sheet. To do this, then, is to do no more than to encode the characters in the writer's hand, arm,

[12] Bryson, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, p. 56.
[13] Bryson, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, p. 57.

and brain.[14] In the sheer repetitiveness of the activity, Qui did the same kind of thing that is done by every language-user with every use of a given word in a language. He embedded the words in the memory of his hand and mind, as each use of a word further embeds it in the language.

Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times makes of the artist's activity a metaphor for one dimension and one effect of language. The dimension is its use. Natural language is language in use, and for anyone competent in a language, its use is more or less automatic, as writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' becomes at a certain point in the exercise. The artist's repeated and systematic performance of language completely covers with signs the sheet that had been blank. The metaphoric effect of the artist's activity is to show language to be opaque because one cannot read through it and dense because one cannot read between its signs. It says, finally, that language blankets the world and all that is in it, and one cannot read the world through the opacity of the signs that constitute it. The world, it would seem, is lost.

The second work is *Printing on Water*, a performance by Song Dong in the Lhasa River, Tibet, 1996. Against the backdrop of mountains the artist stands in a sacred river and, holding above his head a seal carved with the character 'for water', again and again brings it down onto the water's surface. There is no coition of word and thing, however. No character, no matter what it signifies, can unite with or imprint itself on water. The calligraphy in *Writing 'The Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times* cannot be read and the character for 'water' in *Printing on Water* cannot be written.[15] The artist is authorizing the seal by using it. But what is he using it for? Not to say anything. The repeated gestures of imprinting or writing are intransitive. In them writing is at its zero degree.

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[14] Bryson describes the effect: the power of the text lies not in its content but "in the sheer force of the cultural repetition, especially through the internalization of social authority that is performed within the calligrapher's own body as he attempts to incorporate the text inside his own musculature and gestural reflexes." (*Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, p. 57).

[15] All that remains of Song Dong's activity is "the central gesture of the subject's interpellation within the graphic or social field, where power is located entirely within the individual subject's repeated action of creating and re-creating the authority of the seal with his own psychophysical being, again and again." Bryson, *Inside Out*: *New Chinese Art,* p. 57.

The absence of the world, of the other side of language, of everything that language is about, does not, however, mean that the individual is alone. Indeed the world is absent precisely because everything is shot through with the language by which the individual is surrounded. Or so it seems. At the height of the New Wave in Chinese art, which succeeded the social realism of Maoist art, Xu Bing mounted his *Book from the Sky* (1988) (Figure 2) in the National Museum in Beijing. As *Red Humor* did, it surrounds its viewers with writing. On the walls are plastered scrolls reminiscent of the newspapers pasted on walls for everyone to read. Draped from the ceiling are yards and yards of scrolls in the format of ancient religious texts, and on the floor, books bound in the traditional Chinese way. Xu hand-carved 4,000 blocks from which the scrolls were printed in the style of the eleventh century Sung Dynasty and "every detail of the piece was exquisite and perfect: the carved characters, the printing, the binding, and the meticulous design."[16] Yet all but ten of the characters were Xu's invention. They meant nothing. The viewer is cocooned in writing that cannot be read, in hundreds of illegible scrolls.

The repetitions in both W*riting The Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times* and *Printing on Water* are not in *Book from the Sky*. Xu Bing is not encoding Chinese characters in his muscles and mind by writing them repeatedly, nor is he authorizing the character for 'water' by his repeated efforts to print it. Xu's artwork, the work of it, lies in the sheer doing of the project, almost three years of carving 4,000 characters in wood blocks. It is a prayer, a meditation. "He suffered. It was like a morning prayer, the process was more important than the result," said Cao Minglu, curator of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. The process, the exercise, the ritual, is like a dance, where a dancer's body knows what to do, and so in exercise and the performance of a ritual does the performer's body. Nothing, said Wu Shan Zhuan, "can escape from being material."[17] Seen in this light, *Book from the Sky* bears witness to words and books being things, things to be carved, printed, and bound. This book does not come from Confucianism, to which Xu's art refers, or from the artist's intentions to mean. It comes, the title tells us, from the sky.

The idea of writing at its zero degree leads to the thought of art making at its zero degree, to the third subversion, and to adding my

[16] Zhang Zhaohui, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, p. 9.
[17] Wu Shan Zhuan, *Inside Out: New Chinese* Art, p. 159.

list to Bryson's list of social spaces and their languages. Earthworms and silkworms, gunpowder, dust, blood, and violence, in a word, nature brute, blind, and dumb is what is left, avant-garde Chinese artists suggest, when the world appears to be lost. It is the primitive that is left, whatever has penetrated, punctured, or pierced the myriad social and semantic spaces that have failed to fulfill their promises of hospitality and legibility, their claims undermined by the art of the avant-garde.

III. *Third subversion—of the presumption that Western conceptions of art, supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, are adequate to China today*

A decade after *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing installed *The Silkworm Series* in a gallery for the 1998 exhibition *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*. In the gallery is a coffee table with books and magazines, framed pictures on the wall, a TV monitor screening the lifecycle of the silk worm, and its accompanying VCR, whose cover is open. Silkworm moths lay eggs that hatch into worms that spin their threads over everything they come near, which, in the gallery, is everything including the mechanical insides of the VCR. The enveloping of things makes them unrecognizable, their words and images unreadable.

The Chinese have raised silkworms for more than 2,000 years, and silk is an emblem of China. Traditional China is present in the silkworm and so is the modern West, in the form of installation art. Nature also is present. Compare this piece with, say, Damien Hirst's exhibition of the carcass of a once life-threatening shark in a tank of formaldehyde or, moving from an exhibition of death to that of dying, with an installation in which flies emerge from maggots, eat, and die when struck by an insect-o-cutor. These works use, they do not represent, the animals that are their subjects. In two of them, creatures are born, and in one, they die soon after birth. Every living thing is born and dies, but in the meantime they interact with other creatures, including human beings and their works. This meantime is the space occupied by Xu Bing's *Silkworm Series*, in which the worms do what naturally they do, spin threads of silk that end up covering all of the paraphernalia of culture in the gallery.

Silkworms cover over; earthworms burrow under. In *New York Earthworm Room*, made for the same exhibition, Cai Guo-Qiang, who

like Xu Bing left China after 1989 and now lives in New York, appropriated Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* that has been maintained by the Dia Center for the Arts since 1977. De Maria transported yards of earth to a New York art gallery. De-contextualized, it is no longer part of nature. Cai also transported yards of earth to an art gallery, but he reintroduced nature by putting worms and, therefore, life into it. Grass began to grow as the worms aerated the soil and nourished it with organic material. The earth was in one gallery in the exhibition in which a camcorder was focused on the grass, and in an adjoining gallery were video screens, connected by cable to the camcorder, onto which the earthworms' movements were projected.

The salient difference between the two installations of worms, on the one hand, and the work of Hirst and De Maria, on the other, is that the worms were alive and active and the objects in the works by Hirst and De Maria were not. The worms were de-contextualized: they were active in an art gallery instead of nature. But they continued to make their characteristic contributions: one made silk, the other aerated and nourished soil.

Gunpowder was invented in China long years ago and is as much an emblem of China as silk is. Cai Guo-Qiang has used it widely in his work, from *Traces of Ancient Explosions* (1985), made of gunpowder and oil paint on canvas, to the *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters* (1993) in which 600 kilograms of gunpowder were connected to a 10,000-meter long fuse on the ground at the western terminus of the Great Wall. On February 27, 1993 the fuse was ignited to cause a series of successive explosions. Of the project the artist wrote that "the 10, 000 meter wall of light will form a line of Qi energy that will wake the Great Wall, which has been sleeping for thousands of years."[18] And it did so by extending the Great Wall westward.

Gunpowder is one instrument of violent destruction and ground zero dust is the result of another, namely, of the two airplanes that crashed into New York's Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. On the day of the attack Xu Bing collected a bag of dust from the site and with it he later made an installation in a gallery-sized enclosure in the National Museum and Gallery of Cardiff, Wales entitled *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (2002). He sprayed the dust over stencils of let-

[18] Zhang Zhaohui, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, p. 14.

ters spelling out two lines of a seminal seventh century Zen poem. When the dust settled, the stencils were removed and the lines appeared in the dust: "As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect?" The work won the first Artes Mundi prize, an international arts prize awarded in 2004 for work in the exhibition in the National Museum of Cardiff.

Any worms and any gunpowder whatsoever could have been used without changing the identity of the works of which they were a part, but neither the site of the 10, 000-meter wall of light nor the actual dust used to spell out the Zen poem could have been different without destroying the work's identity. And so are these artworks grounded in the world to which they relate not by imitating, representing, or idealizing but by incorporating it into themselves.

The position on the world's stage of the social and the verbal has been called into question by two of the subversions performed in the art world since the end of the Cultural Revolution. What shares the stage with them is the natural, the material, the physical. The artworks introduced so far as examples of the third subversion have used living or once-living nonhuman things, on the one hand, and powders that caused and resulted from explosions, on the other: matter enlivened in the one case and matter plain and simple in the other.

The subject of the final two artworks to be discussed is the human body. The body is not simply matter enlivened. It is matter made human, made conscious of itself, conscious of death, of its inevitable death, and, for the classical Chinese scholar and many an artist of the avant-garde, matter made conscious of its harmony with nature. On the Judeo-Christian-Muslim view, human beings are essentially different from the rest of creation because they alone are enlivened by the breath of God, himself beyond nature's pale. Human beings, matter-made-human, seek to control rather than to harmonize with nature. This difference from the West is manifest in these last two works.

Link of the Body is a performance in which the dead bodies of conjoined infant twins are linked to two artists by tubes through which blood flows into the mouths of the infants; the body of one twin is covered with blood. Linkages abound in *Link of the Body*. The most obvious is the link between the conjoined twins, the result of misdirection in their fetal development. Then there is the indirect connection between the artists by virtue of their each being connected to the twins by a tube of blood, a bloodline, as individuals are connected with their

forebears by bloodlines.[19] The artists 'feeding' the conjoined twins are a male and a female, as they would have to be were they the twins' parents. The most moving link in the performance is the one between living and dead bodies. It constitutes, I want to say, an acknowledgment of death, not the desecration of a corpse. Perhaps 'wonder at' is better than 'acknowledgment of' in light of an answer Peng Yu gave in an interview published in *Chinese Artists: Texts and Interview: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998-2002*. Asked whether her influence had, as her partner just said his had, come from a photographer, Peng said, no, it came from her experience of the death of a childhood playmate:

> [F]acing the death of a person is like an electric shock. I had a friend once … a little girl … [who] died of uremia … When I saw her I suddenly had, I'm not sure what kind of feeling, but it was like life could just fly from a person's body in an instant. Sometimes I think that the second a person is born, or when a person dies, this is really fascinating, so I search for that kind of thing in my work. Sometimes *it amounts to something you or I don't dare to face*. It's also something very pressing and forces me to keep going. Sometimes I use these materials, do this kind of work, in this process I can get the kind of feeling I was talking about.[20] (Emphasis added.)

She is talking about something that beggars understanding, namely, what happens in the instant a person is born or dies. The link of body to body: at birth the link between the bodies of mother and infant is sundered and the infant becomes a single thing. At death the body becomes matter no longer enlivened, but matter that will decay as every generated thing does, gradually ceasing to be a body as it does. But until it does, it is a human body. The pathos of *Link of the Body* lies in the artists' act of infusing the dead bodies with their own (so it seems) life's blood as though to bring the bodies back or to dare us to face the futility of infusing them, dare us to face the difference between being alive and being dead, to face what we cannot understand and so can only acknowledge. If this reading of *Link of the Body* has merit,

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[19] In fact, the connection with ancestors is genetic, but the pre-scientific and popular view is that blood is what connects present with contemporary and long-gone members of a family.

[20] "Sun Yuan and Peng Yu Interview with Ai Waiwai" in *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews*, p. 20, emphasis added.

then neither government censure nor physical disgust nor moral outrage is an appropriate response.[21]

Look at a final example of a work whose theme is also blood and the human body, where the body is female and the blood, menstrual. It is a series of twelve photographs by Chen Lingyang, *Twelve Flower Months* (1999), made from November 1999 to November 2000. In each photograph is the flower of the month specific to it together with a mirror that reflects the artist's menstruating body. The shapes of the mirrors, each different as are the shapes of the photographs themselves, are those of windows and doors in traditional gardens, but instead of the mirrors showing the face of a beautiful woman they show the artist's menstrual bleeding from various angles, variously framed, lit, and colored. *Twelve Flower Months for the First Month Narcissus* (1999) (Figure 3) is a square, relentless in its blackness, hung on the diagonal. An oval mirror suspended on a stand occupies about two thirds of the left side of the plane and three narcissus flowers and leaves, the right. Reflected are the bottom of the buttocks of the artist and her legs down to the back of the knees. Blood trickles down most of her thigh. The blood, the flowers, and highlights on the wooden stand are a soft rosy red, the leaves are green, the mirror light suffused. The whole is quiet, elegant, and beautiful.

The metaphoric connection of women with flowers is undermined when Chen pictures a real connection between female reproductive organs and flowering. The juxtaposition of menstrual periods and blooming flowers highlights the connection of each to the cycle of nature and, hence, to each other. And although, as Chen pointed out in an interview connected with her winning one of the Contemporary Chinese Art Awards in 2002, "[i]n traditional Chinese culture there is the notion of man in harmony with nature," the work still takes its audience by surprise.[22]

About this Chen said that "[w]hen people see this work in a public space, it provokes various reactions. But the work itself also offers the possibility of dispelling such reactions. The possibility of dispelling

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[21] This reading is made in light of Peng Yu's feelings about death. To read the work through its social context instead is to ask what the unnaturally linked twins stand for: the East and the West? Old China and New China? Communism and Capitalism? Why is one splashed with blood and the other not? What does the bloodied one stand for?

[22] "An Interview with Chen Lingyang by Chen Lingyang No. 2 2001/4/28" in *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews*, p. 30.

may come from the traditional elements … Provoking and dispelling … are inextricably bound together. Only through the process of provoking and dispelling can new possibilities emerge."[23] In *Twelve Flower Months* Chen dresses her bleeding vagina in the clothes of classical China: flowers and mirrors beautifully shaped like the windows in garden pavilions. The artist is treating the flow of her monthly blood as worthy a subject of art as flowers and mirrors are. Classical in their serenity and their symbolism, the photographs observe their subject in the way traditional Chinese thought observes the world.

Chen Lingyang and Peng Yu are young women, one born in 1975, the other in 1974, who have made art that springs from a near preoccupation with and reflection on the nature-imposed limits of birth and death and the female body's reproductive cycle. Matter made human is matter made conscious of the mysteries of birth and of death and, for these two artists, made conscious of matter's embedded-ness in nature. What does this come to? The idea that they are not, that no human being is, different in kind from the rest of nature. One effect of this is that death is not regarded as something that has gone terribly wrong and menstrual blood is not regarded as unclean and the menstruating woman untouchable. They are seen as an integral part of the ceaseless cycles of reproduction, birth, and death. Another effect is that the artists treat with respect the materials they use for the third subversive strategy. They treat them as one treats things that have worth and not just value.

Chen's experience of the rhythm of her body's periods is an experience of the rhythms of nature, of its repetitiveness and its duration. She said of the subject of menstruation that "I found myself harassed by the subject and could not put it out of my mind, it was both strong and apt enough for me to express what I wanted to express ... Thus, I used this subject for my artwork."[24] Limits, not repetitiveness and duration, are what move Peng Yu. The effort to capture in her work the feeling that "life could just fly from a person's body in an instant" is "something very pressing and forces me to keep going."[25]

Earthworms and silkworms, gunpowder and dust, dead babies and menstrual blood: here is a grand materialism, one deaf to the cacophony caused by the competing voices of communism and capitalism

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[23] Chen Lingyang, *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews*, p. 30.
[24] Chen Lingyang, *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews*, p. 29.
[25] Peng Yu, *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews*, p. 20.

and immune to the divorce of signifier and signified caused by the competing discourses. When signs are emptied of meaning all that is left for language users to do is to go through the motions, to speak, to write, to listen, to read the signs that carry with them, at least, the memory of meaning. Intransitive, these activities are language at its zero degree. Writing is at zero when the movements of the calligrapher's hand and brush are performed for their own sake, as the movements of a dance are, and speaking is zero when one recites a poem in a language whose script one can read but not understand. The evisceration of meaning from the signs of an individual's world leaves him with the material of the world, which includes the body and its movements.

Bryson's insight that since power in China seems no longer to reside at the level of the great ideologies, perhaps it lies in a level below them where individuals can act, where they can "intervene and innovate at their own scale and on their own terms" is apt.[26] 'Individuals acting' parses out as 'bodies gesturing,' where the gesturing body of the avant-garde artist is what is reconstructing the identity of a people and reinventing the idea of art itself. The material used in the artists' third subversive strategy constitutes a tutorial on the differences between non-living, living, and conscious material things. The attitudes toward the various materials taken by artists of the avant-garde teach viewers willing to send themselves to school the Chinese difference. Lacking a coherent discourse in their dizzyingly fast changing world, the artists work at a level below that of discourse, at the level of matter, matter that the body with its gestures and repetitions transmutes into such material as to start a dialogue with its viewers about who they are as Chinese men and women and what their artworks are.[27]

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[26] Bryson, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, p. 57.

[27] The 2006 Milan International Art Fair was devoted to "a unique artistic phenomenon—Chinese contemporary art—that is developing at an amazingly accelerated pace. [There were panels on] the specificities, processes and evolution of contemporary Chinese art from the perspective of a connection with the international art system, and through many layers of perception existing in China and the West, across boundaries that are far more than merely geographical. MIArt2006 Cina Intra/Extra Ovest," info@e-flux.com, February 15, 2006.

POLITICAL POP ART AND THE CRISIS OF ORIGINALITY

Yi Ying

Political Pop Art, associated with New Generation and Gaudy Art, was no doubt the most important phenomenon in Chinese art in the 1990s. Gaudy Art is the abused and vulgarized Political Pop Art that continued and enlarged the influence of the latter. In many of its interpretations, Political Pop is even confused with Gaudy Art. The political character of Political Pop Art is potential and historical; it is the continuation of the avant-garde art in the 1980s, while Gaudy Art is the overflow of Political Pop. However, it also played an active role in shifting Political Pop Art to the images and spectacle of the new century.

Political Pop does not originate in conscious political criticism, but in the formalist pursuit in the 1980s avant-garde art. In the art of the 1980s, formalism did not mean the creation of forms. When modern western art entered China during the period of reform and opening up, it soon became a goal pursued by young people. Constructed mainly by formalism, modern western art was considered the symbol of modernity and freedom by the radical youth. In imitating and pursuing modern art patterns, the significance of performance was valued over art in its own right. With one hundred years of development, modern western art had developed various styles. In the 1980s in China, all these styles from different periods, regions and genres were presented on one platform, and the avant-garde selected certain styles purely out of their own tastes and ideas. But in fact traditional inertia, cultural differences, and practical conditions had shaped the possibilities for selection.

Pop Art was brought into China in 1985 when Robert Rauschenberg, the American pop artist, held his spectacular tour exhibition in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing highlighting silkscreen prints, sculptures, and ready-mades. This is the year that the 1985 Movement developed, and Robert Rauschenberg's exhibition undoubtedly provided a new reference and power for the avant-garde. But Pop Art has been misinterpreted in China from the very begin-

ning. In the west, Pop Art was considered the art of consumerism, spectacle, and the era of image, while in China it provided a realistic reference instead.[1] Being the symbol of modern western art, abstract art, to a great degree, has been ignored by the Chinese avant-garde. Apart from the institutional and academic repression, this is due also to its lack of narrative and idea-expressing possibilities. Of course, the most important point is that the pre-industrial China lacked not only the visual conditions and experience of a modern society, but also the classical and academic traditions to which abstract art opposed.

From the early 1980s onwards, the styles of modern western art that have had the strongest influence on China include realist art (such as Andrew Wyeth and Alex Colville), which is not modern art, and the post-impressionism of early modernism. All these styles fit the academic background of Chinese artists and met the needs for local realism. However, this revision of academicism could neither provide a true avant-garde idea nor reflect the pursuit of democracy and freedom underneath the avant-garde style. Pop Art thus bridged realism with the avant-garde. Wang Guangyi's (b.1957) works during the Northern Art Group period were typical geometrical abstract paintings. The black abstract structure (although containing figural hints) implies the spiritual quandary and the imprisoned thought of the people, but he gradually turned to the form of Pop Art that was a combination of black grids with specific images. The grids entwined some kind of relationship with his geometrical abstraction. He combined black grids with Rembrandt's works, the initial meaning of which should be the mixture of classicism and modernism, but Rembrandt's works here possessed the significance of ready-mades that implied not only classical, but also modern, art itself. Compared with his works during the Northern Art Group period, his Pop Art contains more readable and transmitting potential. Intentionally or unintentionally, Wang Guangyi among his contemporaries achieved the transforma-

[1] "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation." And again: "The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass distribution of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanshauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm—a world view transformed into an objective force." Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), pp. 12-13. (MBW)

tion of Pop Art in China, which fit the Chinese way of image reading and adopted a form more modern than pure abstract art.

In the *China Avant-Garde Exhibition* in 1989, Wang Guangyi's work was *Mao AO*. This work is full of political implications, but at that time it was not considered very political because portraits of Mao Zedong were the memory of the time as large-scale portraits of Mao were painted everywhere all over China in the early Cultural Revolution, and portraits of Mao Zedong as well as quotations from Chairman Mao became the major public art. The black grids in the painting were used as a means of enlarging portraits in China. They were originally the symbol of modern art and now possessed the character of ready-mades. This piece of work is not simply the representation of history, but the author's personal memory represented by him with material objects. This painting in a way became the symbol of the exhibition. It is very interesting that the whole 1985 Movement made use of abstract and expressionist forms to pursue the spirit of modern art, while the style of Pop Art became the symbol in this summarizing exhibition. It was generally believed that Pop Art was a more avant-garde style than abstract art. Unlike abstract art, Pop Art was readable and descriptive and as such shared the same tone with the historical critique and expression of ideas required by the Thoughts Liberation Movement in the 1980s.

Wang Guangyi's later Great Criticism Series still continued the memories of the Cultural Revolution, but in it he combined current reality with history when he collaged and juxtaposed typical images of both history and the current reality. However, Great Criticism possesses more characteristics of Pop Art than of Mao Zedong Portraits because he eliminated painterliness in the execution of painting, and mixed reproduction of commercial advertisements with colors and historical images. He thus fully adopted the form of Pop Art, and also its political traits were clear at a glance. These kinds of political traits were not criticism aimed at political realities, but were the personal account of historical and practical experiences. This means that avant-garde was no longer a castle in the air of formalism, but an expression of life and experiences based on reality. Pop Art became popular at the *Guangzhou Oil Paintings Biennale* in 1992, and Zhang Xiaogang (b.1958) came to the fore. Zhang Xiaogang's diptych *Birthday* has obvious characteristics of traditional oil painting, but its narrative manner is characteristic of Pop Art, although it's the 'painted' Pop Art. Zhang Xiaogang reflected collective destiny through personal history

and used individual and collective historical photos (images) to illustrate the destiny of the people in the photographs. It is these photos that led to Zhang Xiaogang's "Bloodline Series" which officially entered the ranks of political pop art.

The exhibition *Post 1989-China's New Art* in Hong Kong was held almost at the same time as *Guangzhou Oil Painting Biennale,* and it is the first show of Political Pop. Fang Lijun (b.1963) and Liu Wei (b.1962) are the two representative figures. Compared with Wang Guangyi and Zhang Xiaogang, they seemed to represent another time. For the former, the transformation of forms was most important, and the historical responsibilities and sense of criticism inherited from the generation of young intellectuals during China's Cultural Revolution were still reflected in the new form. Although their historical understandings came from personal experience, the political characteristics in their paintings were spontaneous and conscious. Fang Lijun and Liu Wei belong to the generation growing up in the period of reform and opening up. They have no memory of the experience of suffering that the young intellectuals in the Cultural Revolution had. They were concerned with their personal life and looked for a personal position in the coming commercial society. Ideals and beliefs were no longer their subjects; their vision was their life and experience. They did not even mean to pursue any new form. Both of them studied printmaking, so the large-area contrasts on their paintings are from their printmaking experience rather than the images.

The most significant features of New Generation art are the true expression of personal experience, which seems automatically to have the nature of an avant-garde. The collapse of beliefs and the lost ideals were expressed on the fulcrum of reality. The figures created by Fang Lijun originated from Beijing street life; he seemed to paint the lower class people without any modification and enlarged these figures. His purpose was not to concern the lower class or marginals, but to allude to a life state or mental state, especially when these kinds of images converted into his own images. Authenticity has a special meaning in Chinese contemporary art. The copied reality emerges from the fog of falseness and swims against the stream of decorated reality and political propaganda. Soldiers' images appeared in Liu Wei's works. Liu Wei was born into a soldier's family, and the images of soldiers looked like copies of family pictures. All these were life records to Liu Wei and lost heroes to the society. Its political meaning hence needs no more words.

Wang Guangyi's Great Cultural Revolution posters, Zhang Xiaogang's historical photographs, Liu Wei's soldier images, Li Shan's Mao Zedong portraits, as well as those exaggerated, dull, giggling images created by Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun, altogether form a whole. When the painting style of Pop Art possesses certain political characteristics, it becomes 'Political Pop'. The development of Pop Art style has been a gradual process, but in the early 1990s Pop Art was suddenly given political significance. On one side, this is surely because of the internal needs of Pop Art, such as the copy of ready-mades, the appropriation of specific cultural symbols, and the conversion of symbols' meanings under certain conditions. On the other side, it is related to the specific historical conditions, although it may be an accident of history.

From the political storm in Beijing in 1989 to Deng Xiaoping's Southern Speech in 1992, Chinese society was in the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization Movement led from top to bottom.[2] The political atmosphere in the whole society was very strong, and there were rare works that directly resisted the Movement. But the works that have no political intentions may also be given a political meaning. Fang Lijun's work *One Yawning Man* was commented on by American critic Andrew Solomon, "This is not a yawn, it's a cry of rescuing China." An expression of personal experience, coupled with the method of Pop Art, became the symbol of cynical art and artistic activity that was contrary to the mainstream ideology. At the same time, there was also a non-mainstream political tendency in the society. Although it was not for specific political purposes, it had a certain relationship with the social environment. The reform and opening up policy led to some social problems including polarization between the rich and the poor, rising prices, and corruption problems.

People missed the past times and indirectly expressed their dissatisfaction with reality. Songs, images, and even model operas of past times became popular in civil society. To a certain extent, Political Pop is an artistic activity of civil society. It is not only a reflection of reality, but also the expression of an idea, which provides the art with certain legitimacy. Of course, an artist would not appropriate these Pop political symbols from the perspective of society, but they still have a certain relationship because they are in the same social environment and

[2] This was a speech Deng Xiaoping made in Guangdong in which he noted that in the eight years since he had been there, the rapid growth in special economic areas exceeded his expectations. He spoke of what still needed to be done and characterized the task as "building socialism with Chinese characteristics" (MBW).

the civil society inspired them. Fang Lijun's Cynical Art and Hooligan Art turned originally valuable things valueless, which also includes the disrespect of this art for political beliefs and symbols (Figure 4). From another point of view, this generation has no personal experiences and memories of suffering of the times, and they dismantled the ideals and beliefs through these symbols but did not get to the bottom of the political significance of the particular symbols at that time.

External conditions are also the key to the success of Political Pop. China did not stop the reform and opening up policy in 1992. On the contrary, China strengthened the policy. In the 1980s, China opened its door, and western culture was introduced into China, resulting in the 1985 Movement that pursued modern art. After Beijing's political disturbances, drastic changes in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, even though western countries imposed political and economic sanctions on China for a time, China was still facing the opportunities of globalization. It was necessary for China to break through western containment and exhibit its own strengths order to continue the reform and opening up policy. This kind of all-round opening up is also a necessary condition to attract foreign investment and get access to the international market. Political Pop benefited from this opportunity. The free access of non-mainstream art at home and abroad transmitted a signal to the world that our opening up policy was serious, our art was free, and even the art that had no official sanction could be created and exhibited freely. Because of such a condition, a large number of works of non-mainstream art, including Political Pop and conceptual art, was exhibited outside of China and became international.

Another condition of Political Pop is the art market. The art market in China formed in the early 1990s. There was no art market in China in the 1980s. No one thought about the market or material benefits of pursuing modern art at that time. The society was at a low level of egalitarianism in the 1980s, and there was no temptation of money. The art market appeared at the same time as the market economy came into being. The impact of an art market to art creation is the great difference between the low level of life of the Chinese people and high art work prices. The art market at that time was mainly an overseas buyer's market, and once the poor Chinese artists entered the market, they immediately got rid of poverty and became rich. The exhibition *Post 1989-China's New Art* itself had a commercial background, and the artists who became famous at this exhibition were also the first to enter

China's affluent class. In this sense, Political Pop is a typical domestic sale of commodities originally produced for exports. In other words, Political Pop first reached success abroad and then became influential at home. For many artists, this success is mainly economic success. Although Political Pop was highly praised in western art criticism, it would be a flash in the pan if there were no economic backing. In the 1980s, the modern art movement copied western modern art, but received no favorable reviews by the west. Localized critical realism and local realism could hardly be recognized by the west, as the old-fashioned styles and the complexity of the social background were too difficult for the west to understand.

Besides the ideological factors, there are two important reasons why Political Pop was quickly understood and praised by the west. First, in the way of form, it adopted the international language of post-modernism under the condition of globalization. Commercial advertising, consumption culture, film and television images, and urban landscape together constitute a common visual experience that is reflected in art as images of mass culture. Political Pop is a Chinese style, but its elements, such as simple figures, flat-coated structure, and pure colors suit the customary western appreciation of contemporary art. This style is fresh and avant-garde in the domestic community, while common and popular in the international community. Second, the Political Pop figures are simple symbols that can be easily identified. Apart from simple political symbols, the characters in Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun's paintings are also typical figures of Chinese people that are exaggerated and adapted to the western impression of Chinese images. The images and political symbols were granted political significance by westerners in accordance with their understanding of Chinese politics. The key point is not how the west understands and evaluates Political Pop or what exhibitions the artists take part in, but the financial support they get. These artists were the first to have artistic economic success in China. In such an environment, the earliest Political Pop artists, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, and Liu Wei, pursued neither politics nor money. They shifted from historical critiques to the narration of lives. Economic success was something later, but economic success attracted many artists to follow them, thus so-called Gaudy Art formed.

Gaudy art created a trend that appropriated a lot of political symbols to meet the taste of the west or the market. But in the middle of the 1990s when the Gaudy Art was most active, Chinese society did

not provide strong support for such images. Its visual resources were mainly Chinese folk art; Chinese folk art and political symbols were combined together. Some are not truly political symbols, but cultural symbols such as coins, antiques, and traditional arts. Folk art colors and contemporary culture have similarities, but the character of folk art is still primitive, which in a sense realizes the localization of contemporary art from both the sides of visual resources and cultural resources. But this kind of localization was realized under the recognition and support of the west. In the late 1990s, Political Pop and Gaudy Art gradually became a kind of pattern, specifically, a kind of commercial pattern. With the development of China's economy and the further opening up of society, China's international environment became more peaceful and the conditions that bred Political Pop no longer exist. But once a form is fixed, it will develop by its own logic. For a long period, especially in relation to the field of oil painting, Political Pop and its variations will continue to dominate the buyer's market.

In the 21st century, the development of oil painting seems to have encountered obstacles that were obscured by external prosperity. This prosperity is the market. In fact, the real prosperous period of oil painting was in the middle 1900s. Its tendency to decline emerged at the beginning of this century. Judged by art history, it is difficult to say what kind of style can flourish just because the market pushes it. Yet the market and the art collections it supports maintain one style for a period of time even after its decline. There are always many reasons for one style, one movement, or even one kind of art to wax and wane, but one key sign of the decline of a style is the loss of creative vitality, and the loss of the capacity of self-renewal. The state of oil painting in the new century includes repetition of language, lack of thought, and its increasing marginalization in the field of visual culture. Actually, commercialization is not the main reason for such a situation because good art will never be bound by commercialization, and the original creation of art will not aim at money. But if art loses its original creativity, it will be caught in a quagmire of money.

The crisis of oil painting is due to the loss of original creation, and the crisis of original creation started in the 1990s. In 1992, Pop Art was one important phenomenon in the *Guangzhou Oil Paintings Biennale*. Political Pop came into being at the exhibition *Post 1989-China's New Art*. Thereafter, Pop style became the main style of Chinese oil painting. Apart from subject and background, the emergence of Pop style is one

important turning point for the language of Chinese oil painting. Pop Art was introduced into China at the middle of the 1980s, but it did not arouse much attention, because Pop Art was a non-painting style. Chinese avant-garde art was still transforming the painting languages throughout the 1980s. Western modernism from impressionism to abstract expressionism was the main reference, while Pop Art is basically a post-modernist art form. After the 1990s, Pop style, which in a way still inherited the avant-garde art concepts of the 1980s, became popular. That is to say, the primary reason for the emergence of Pop Art is still based on art itself, especially on the need to reform art's language and forms. The need for reform means that both traditional paintings (academic or classical) and modernist paintings have little possibility to create new forms. So the reform of language transforms the object of art's language from painting itself to the outside world and its images, which is just the opposite side of the concept of art in modernism.

The transformation can be divided into two levels; one is the usage of images in traditional representation, specifically, replacing nature with photos and copying photography's techniques as well as subjects. This level can also be divided into two categories. One is to make oil paintings that look like or create effects similar to photos or that are copies of photos. The other is to make photos that look like traditional oil paintings. Liu Xiaodong (b.1963) is the representative artist who has the greatest influence. Even main theme paintings make substantial use of photocopying and can look as though they are photographs. Another level is the direct appropriation of Pop Art. In *Annual Exhibition Nominated by Chinese Critics* in 1994, someone questioned the flat-coated oil painting, wondering whether or not it was oil painting. This is to ask whether the Pop-style or poster-like oil paintings are still to be considered oil paintings. Although Pop Art is the appropriation of commercial culture and consumption culture images, the concept of Pop applied to a kind of style in China at that time rather than to a cultural reaction to consumption society. For example, the works of Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun, and Zhang Xiaogang have elements of Pop Art, but they do not have the background of commercial culture and they still use oil painting materials. Yet none of them uses traditional oil painting language, nor do they even use forms of modernist paintings. This is an important turn for the development of art; but for oil painting it is a crisis of language.

When classicism was transforming itself into modernism, the crisis of classicism was that it gave up the internal nature of media and relied instead on literariness and descriptiveness. Although oil painting requires great skills, classical oil painting remained dependent on the literary. The language revolution of modernism was the return to the media's own expressive force. The process of modernism's flattening of the picture plane was the process of the continuous purification of visual language that transforms figures into abstractions. Abstraction without figures also impoverishes the languages of art, and abstract art itself dispels the language and materials of oil painting. Pop Art is the return of images, but instead of going back to traditional oil painting, it started the process of post-modernism. In the middle of 1990, because of China's rapid economic development, social forms and social life changed enormously. Post-modern time came rapidly with the strong rise of mass culture and the emergence of a consumption society. The social environment that Pop Art encountered in the west reappeared in China after the middle of 1990, or we can say that China had conditions similar to those of the landscape of the society that gave birth to Pop Art.

In those conditions, a new generation of artists appeared that is the cartoon generation. In fact, Pop Art has no direct counterpart in China. Even the Political Pop named after Pop Art is quite different from American Pop Art. The main difference in form is that American Pop Art appropriated ready-mades images from its media, while Chinese Pop Art copied the images in traditional oil paintings. Therefore, it may be more proper to call it the style of (appropriated or copied) images than Pop Art. As mentioned above, the transformation from traditional oil painting language (including the modernist style) to images means that oil painting gave up its own language features and relied on the methods of expression in other media. The space for oil painting will be further squeezed with the development of video art. Actually, when it became usual for the artists to use the approach of images, they were not aware of the crisis of language, which was the loss of originality. On the contrary, the advantages of other media went into oil painting with images. This means that the requirements of the subjects painted became more important than formal factors and provided one chance for the survival of oil painting. It can be seen from the New Generation and Political Art in the 1990s that subjects derived from images overwhelmed the forms.

Although the Political Pop that was popular in the 1990s remained prosperous in the market after 2000, it had lost its vitality and was basically copying the success of the past. It was not the child of the time when pictures were read. It was the casual combination of traditional expressions of form and Pop images. The social significance of Political Pop is granted by the images themselves. Works by Liu Xiaodong and Fang Lijun are typical examples. In the image-tide of the new century the artists lost their sensitivity to fresh images. Realist painting has also become the painting of images. Photos have been gradually absorbed into realist painting since the 1990s. At first photos were used as the reference (or source) for forms in paintings. Then people directly copied photos into oil paintings. Now people are using inkjet printing to transfer a photo that is in their computer onto a painting. Realist painting draws back step by step and may finally give up all traditional realism. Of course, there are still many people who stick to tradition, but in the modern climate the copying of images seems to be more productive and intensive than the methods of traditional representation. Especially in the Internet era today, a vast network of images provides almost infinite possibilities for the representation of reality.

Since 2000, visualization has become the main feature of the development of oil paintings. The tendency of visualization can generally be inspected through three styles: Gerhard Richter-style painting, the cartoon revolution, and what is called 'bad painting'. The first style is a continuation of the Political Pop that intentionally adopted the resources of images and remained in the realm of painterly expressions. Richter-style painting is the most important phenomena. It was unexpected that the German painter Gerhard Richter would have so many followers in China. Chinese artists learned the possible relationships between photographic images and paintings from his work, which seemed to open a new road for painting. Richter's works are profound. Blurred photos imply the memory of history, and the ambiguity between photo and painting retains the manual aura that avoids the machine-reproduced look of Pop Art. Photos are represented as images, on the one hand, and as ready-mades (original images appropriated and used in a new way), on the other. Since they are the original images, photos themselves contain the original signified. Generally speaking, the re-presentation of original images always replaces or displaces their signification by putting them in different contexts.

Political Pop has no clear political meanings. The works of Wang Guangyi and Zhang Xiaogang can be considered as copies of original images, but they have no direct political implications. Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun feature the painting style of Pop Art that uses the language of advertising. In the context of globalization in the 1990s, the works of these artists were endowed with specific political meanings and became popular in the art markets at home and abroad, and attracted many followers. Realistic political symbols and photos with a long history were reproduced in large quantity, the former were mainly works of Gaudy Art, while the latter were mainly paintings. This was the context in which Richter appeared. He blurred original photos by painting over them, and his works provided a painterly expression of photos that seemed to be a fresh painting style. The style not only kept the original meanings of the original images, but also met the needs of paintings, which were the actual demands of the market. Richter's style became a major painting style at the time, and the blurred images originating from daily life to painted landscapes, from the appropriation of ancient paintings to old family photos, were everywhere. It should be noted that Richter's styles are diverse. He made abstract art as well as photo-paintings and was known for his nickname 'chameleon' in the arts community in Germany. His abstract art was rarely commented upon in China, while his photo-paintings were popular and even became the mainstream style of contemporary art for a time. In addition to the reason of markets, the needs of the oil painting complex may also have been a reason. If we say that Political Pop followed Pop Art as a modernist style, the cartoon generation used a language that automatically converted the visual experiences of landscape or traditional society into artistic expression. Born in the 1970s or 1980s, these young artists have grown up in an environment of pop culture and cartoons that has had a much larger influence on them than academic education has because this cartoon revolution first broke out in the schools. Cartoons in childhood, online games in boyhood, film and television as well as rock and roll in youth, all these experiences not only decided their ways of visual expression, but also implied values that subverted the classical values. Cartoon-style first appeared in the 1990s and presented a splendid sight after 2000. Although the cartoon-style soon became popular in the market, it is still a local original creation. Pop Art style and Richter-style are both appropriations of existing western styles with local contents added. But cartoon-style is different. There is

cartoon-style art in western contemporary art, but in China it was born entirely from the experiences of the youths themselves. There is no ready reference to the style in the west. Because of this, cartoon-style reflects not only the visual experience and schema of young people, but also the experiences of their lives. Different from Pop Art images, cartoon images, including online game images, are not copies of images. Cartoon images, then, are not appropriations or re-contextualizations of what original images signify. Artists use them not as objects of appropriation to read and identify but as the images of concepts that express their own ideas. The subjects of cartoon art are various, but the overall tone is irony and ridicule. The cartoon world is a virtual world, and once the virtual language is used to represent the real world, reality will be a cartoon.

The third style cannot be specifically classified. It contains not only the elements of traditional oil painting, but also reflection of landscape society. Usually observation by the ruling body, anxiety about survival, social criticism, and the language of images are mixed together. In a sense it is a variant of traditional expressionism and is called 'bad painting' in contemporary criticism. Bad painting still falls under the concept of painting, but it is not painting done by those with professional training. It is non-professional, primitive, original painting. The name 'bad painting' first appeared in the Italian art criticism of the 1970s that had a close relationship with poverty art or *Arte Povera*.[3] 'Bad painting' means resistance to industrial civilization, as well as to rules and systems, and the return to the origin and the soil. Bad painting has its own history, which is the formal return back to the nature of life sought in art from primitivism to expressionism and neo-expressionism. Contemporary bad painting is a mixture of contemporary visual experience and the survival experience of returning to the nature, life, and body. The more developed and civilized the society, the harder will be the return.

Therefore, bad painting has a dual nature: in its form is the body as the sign of life. In its content is the combat between instinct, desire, the origin of life, on the one hand, and the system that binds them, on the other. Of course, such a combat does not necessarily lead to destruction. It also contains the freedom of life and longing for freedom. Chen Shuxia's (b.1963) works can be examples of the freedom of life and the

[3] Arte Povera was a style that promoted a revolutionary art free of convention, the power structure, and the market place (MBW).

longing for freedom, (Figure 5) and Sichuan painter Liu Xintao (b.1968) is the representative of the destruction the combat can bring. (Figures 6,7,8) Liu Xintao's *Despondent Night* is like a parable of life: the instincts are like ghosts wandering in the dark night of the city. Although there is still some trace of Richter, the integrity of academic style has shattered in the spiritual combat.

It is a hard task to summarize contemporary oil paintings, not only because of not having the distance of time, but also because of market interference. Of all kinds of arts, oil paintings are the most marketable, and the market covers not only criticism but also art itself. How to clear the fog of the market to make the right judgments? There seems to be no successful story about how to proceed. A lot of artists who truly pursue art have given up oil painting and other types of painting, and adopted non-commercial artistic expressions that cannot be bought by capital. Considering this situation, the current state of oil painting is very poor indeed.

CONTEMPORARY ART IN CHINA: 'ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE' AND THE CREATIVE TRIUMPH OF CAI GUO-QIANG

Laurie Adams

As Craig Clunas wrote in 1997, the enormous range of art forms, techniques, and materials in a country with a history as long and complex and a geography as vast and varied as China's makes it impossible to speak of *a* 'Chinese Art'. He therefore concluded that the notion of a 'unifying principle' of 'Chinese Art' is a creation of nineteenth-century Europe and America.[1] The same is true to a degree of contemporary art in China, although market forces since the art boom of the 1980's have seemed, at least in the west, to create exactly that—a notion of 'Chinese contemporary art'. But there is a big *but* to consider: two aspects of Chinese culture and history have served to inhibit real freedom to 'be contemporary' in China.

One inhibitory factor resides in the history of Western influence on art in China and the controversy it has inspired—and continues to inspire—over the degree to which artists should accept and assimilate Western art media and practices. The other factor lies within the country itself, namely, the changing political environment (especially from the early twentieth century) and varying degrees of repression against freedom of expression. These two aspects of Chinese culture have created a form of what is now Harold Bloom's proverbial—and oedipal—'anxiety of influence'.[2]

Art and Politics: China and the West

Western influence, notably the Portuguese, began to infiltrate China around the sixteenth century and increased through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with Britain's opium exports. China lost two Opium Wars, and foreign concessions were established in Shanghai.

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[1] See Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, Oxford and New York, 1997, pp. 9-10.

[2] See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, New York and London, 1973.

In the nineteenth century, with the introduction of photography, the speed of the influence of western imagery increased. Officials of the Qing Dynasty tried to suppress photography, which nonetheless was well established by the twentieth century. (Under Mao, however, the medium was tightly controlled.) With the onset of the 1911 Republican Revolution, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty, open debates arose over the degree to which China should be westernized.

Early in the twentieth century, the Chinese government financed the study of a few artists in Europe, notably in London, Paris and Berlin. In 1935, hoping to show the world that there was a strong national art tradition in China, the Guomindang sent works to an exhibition in London. But this proved a double-edged sword for nationalism, because it also opened up cross-cultural artistic dialogue between East and West. At the same time, however, within China itself there was little or no market for artists working in a Western painting tradition.[3]

With the communist takeover of China in 1949, following civil war and the invasion by Japan, several modernist artists emigrated to Taiwan and Hong Kong. Political oversight in China inhibited modernism, and artists who wanted to succeed were well advised to toe the line of Socialist Realism. Many art schools were closed and, writes Clunas, Soviet-style art education heralded the end of the "commercial art market . . . and private patronage."[4]

Mao Zedong believed that the function of art was to be morally sanguine and understandable to the general public—shades of the Council of Trent. In his 1949 lecture on art and literature, Mao laid the foundation of a Marxist ideology in which the arts are seen as reflecting economics and class. For Karl Marx, art was produced by the proletariat (the workers) and it was exploited by the bourgeoisie (the ruling, ownership classes). Capitalism, in Marx's view, had accentuated class distinctions and in the case of art had alienated artists from the art they made.

Mao Zedong took the Marxist approach a step further. He argued that the role of art was to advance the political agenda of communism. Mao believed that art and politics, as well as content and form, should

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[3] Clunas, *Op. cit.,* p. 206 and see figure 116, cites the example of Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), who was influenced by Matisse. But the art market in China rejected the Western classical tradition of the nude. Chinese taste did not accept the nude as high culture and resisted the tradition of drawing from the nude.

[4] *Ibid.*

be unified.[5] He denigrated the bourgeois attitudes of the West in favor of the proletariat, whose efforts at reform became the ideal iconography of communist art by way of Soviet Social Realism. Both style and technique were, to a large extent, dictated by the communist state, which was also the main patron of the arts.

Although at first Mao was responsible for some major cultural and economic advances, by the mid-1950's he began to limit freedom. He instituted forced 're-education' and imposed travel restrictions inside and outside of China. His Great Leap Forward of 1958-1960, designed to improve agricultural and steel production, was a total failure during which forty million people died of starvation.

A particular subject of artistic debate involved the merits of oil painting, which was considered a Western medium. But during the 1950's, Soviet art schools in Moscow, where the Chinese could study, advocated oil painting. In the Soviet schools, traditional Chinese painting was condemned as a remnant of feudalism. Nevertheless, in Beijing, in 1959, two artists, Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue, painted a huge political picture in traditional Chinese ink and colors on paper for the Great Hall of the People. Entitled *This Land so Rich in Beauty*, the work was a backdrop for political meetings and depicted a snow-covered landscape with a red sun—the symbol of Mao's rise to power. Superimposed on the surface of the painting was a calligraphic poem by Mao himself, *Ode to Snow*, which had been the inspiration for the image.[6] Politics was now the dominant force in the Chinese art world.

From the mid-1960's, Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a period of conflict for artists. From 1966 to 1976, the Red Guards, radical students supported by Mao, rampaged against moderates across China. They destroyed most of the country's feudal past, including art, architecture, literature and other intellectual and cultural expressions. Many artists were sent to labor on farms; others were instructed to make political art. The only published work sanctioned by the state was Mao's *Little Red Book.* His ideology, with himself as the national icon, together with red books, flag-waving, and marching youths, became a preferred iconography. Nevertheless, possibly stemming in part from President Nixon's 1972 visit to China, influence from the west filtered into China. This can be seen, for example, in a white marble sculpture of 1976 by Ye Yushan for Mao's mausoleum. It

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[5] See Berel Lang and Forrest Williams, eds., *Marxism and Art, New York, 1972.*

[6] Clunas, pp 212–214.

shows a dignified, seated Mao Zedong in a relaxed pose reminiscent of the poses of Jefferson and Lincoln in their own memorial statues in Washington, D. C. In 1976, with Mao's death on September 9 of that year, the Cultural Revolution officially came to an end.

Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, remained alive. She, along with three others, comprised the so-called Gang of Four, who blocked the changes advocated by Premier Zhou-En-Lai, who died soon thereafter. With Deng Xiaoping, who came to power in 1978, there was some loosening of the totalitarian reins, and he allowed an exhibition of avant-garde photography. But artists remained in a difficult position *vis-à-vis* anything resembling western-style modernism.

Although it was now relatively safe for older artists to resume prerevolutionary art styles and techniques, a new generation of artists who had more contact with the arts outside of China ignited new conflicts. As with the nineteenth-century French Salon, there was tension between artists who participated in official exhibitions and those who were more avant-garde.

In the 1980's, as China began to recognize the economic advantages of capitalism (though not democracy), western influence on Chinese art expanded, but not enough to grant complete freedom of expression to artists. A group known as the *Stars* opposed official Communist art, although it was largely ignored by the Chinese press. A large portrait of 1981 by Luo Zhongli, entitled *My Father*, has been compared to the close-up portraits of Chuck Close without the pixilated effect. It shows a dark-skinned Chinese peasant whose wrinkled skin is a sign of years of hard work and exposure to the sun. He wears a white headscarf and lifts a bowl to his mouth.

This work is unusual in the history of Chinese art, for portraiture is not a traditional genre. Aside from Mao's face—also depicted by Andy Warhol and other Westerners—there is little Chinese portraiture conveying the psychology of the sitter, as is often the case in Western art. In any case, Chinese officials considered *My Father* to be backward and—shades of Veronese's *Last Supper* and the Inquisition—the jury of the National Youth Art Exhibition changed the name to *Father*. This seemingly altered the work from a personal image to a 'fatherland' type of father that minimized or eliminated the autobiographical character of the work.

In the course of the 1980's new efforts toward freedom in writing and in imagery, as well as contacts with the West, coincided with a

fledgling avant-garde.[7] Western theory also began to infiltrate Chinese art writing, and some critics incorporated Semiotics, Deconstruction, and Post-Modernism into their thinking about art. China produced variations on Western feminism, body art, performance, Pop and kitsch as, from the late 1980's, the international art market began making inroads into China. But whatever modern inclinations resulted from such exposure were squelched by the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989. Iconography critical of the government went underground.[8] After 1990, Chinese artists traveled more frequently, worked abroad, and several produced interesting combinations of Chinese and Western tradition.

Xu Bing's (born 1955) *A Book from the Sky*, for example, was installed from 1987 to 1991 at the University of Wisconsin art museum. He combined what appears to be calligraphy (but is not calligraphy) with western-style wood-working and printing. The characters in the work cannot be read and their aesthetic appeal is purely formal, based on abstract designs imbued with a Chinese flavor. According to Clunas, these characters—there are 4,000 of them—present a challenge to the past as well as to the present in China.[9] Ironically, they combine non-figurative abstraction, which is not, and never has been, a central mode of visual Chinese expression, with narrative meaning. At the same time, however, they are not narrative by virtue of not being actual characters. Xu Bing's 'characters' are thus a good example of attempting to navigate between eastern and western approaches to imagery.

Wenda Gu (born 1955), whose *Pseudo Characters: Contemplation of the World* (1984 to1986) also used 'pseudo' characters, was important in the New Wave movement of 1985. The New Wave credo—"Art forms are unlimited and nothing is prohibited"[10]—was consistent with the artist's new approach to tradition and the west. But Wenda Gu's first one-man show in China was closed because party officials found his characters that were not characters to be 'baffling'.[11] He dealt with the reaction to his work by moving to New York in 1993. Six years later, he received a MacArthur award. His work, according to Richard

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[7] Richard Vine, *New China New Art*, Munich, no date, p. 14.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Clunas, p. 221.
[10] Vine, p. 78.
[11] Vine, p. 55.

Vine, reflects the "capacity of words to both communicate and deceive."[12]

In a very different vein from Xu Bing and Wenda Gu, Chen Yifei (1946–2005) produced a kind of Photo-Realism in *Lingering Melodies from the Xunyang River* (oil on canvas, 120 x 149cm) in 1991. He depicted three female musicians in traditional costume composed of colorful silk textures and elaborate embroidery set against a black background. Lacquered stools and detailed instruments are self-consciously Chinese. According to Clunas, Xu Bing was more critically esteemed than Yifei, who nevertheless enjoyed greater success in the market.[13] 'Post-colonial' discussion and the so-called 'hybridity' of Chinese art notwithstanding, Clunas asserts, the fact is that Chinese artists "cling tenaciously to the ideal of 'Chinese art'."[14]

From the 1990's, according to Gao Minglu,[15] money became an unavoidable issue in the art market of China. Many artists left the country and created what he calls a 'third space' namely, Post-Orientalism. By this he means art created by Chinese artists outside China, including in the West. Prominent in this group are Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Cai Guo-Qiang (about the last of whom there is more discussion below).

In the early years of the twenty-first century, conflicts between freedom of expression and repression persisted in China. The third Shanghai Biennale of 2000 included an exhibition entitled *Fuck Off* in English and, more delicately in Mandarin, *Uncooperative Attitude*, which was organized by the artist Ai Weiwei and the curator Feng Boyi. Seemingly a step in the direction of the artistic freedom to rebel, the show was closed by the government and two years of 'oversight' followed.[16] But in this case repression was somewhat foiled by market forces when critics and dealers alike admired the work. Government 'oversight' promptly loosened as visions not of sugarplums but of money and 'global status' loomed on the artistic horizon.[17] So, writes

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[12] Vine p. 61.
[13] Clunas, p. 203.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Gao Minglu ed. *Inside out: New Chinese Art*, Catalogue of the Asia Society Galleries Exhibition, New York, (September 14, 1998–January 3, 1999) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (February 26–June 1, 1999), pp. 21-22.
[16] Vine, pp. 14–15.
[17] Vine, p. 15.

Richard Vine, artists in China found themselves with three choices: "subsume oneself to the venerable native conventions; abandon the old ways completely and embrace a Western aesthetic; or attempt somehow to reconcile the two."[18]

Thus, according to Vine, artists had to navigate the market, while maintaining Chinese tradition and the Chinese character of their work. They achieved this, he writes, by choosing "a middle way—neither rigorously representational nor fully abstract."[19] The pseudo-calligraphy of Wenda Gu and Xu Bing would seem to embody such a 'middle way' as they are nether figurative in the western sense nor purely within Chinese tradition. And further complicating the issue is the fact that actual Chinese characters are sometimes pictorial, such as the man walking at the center of a rectangular space that represents EXIT. In their very pictorial nature, the characters defy the semiotic views that the relation of a word to what it signifies is arbitrary. Compared to western alphabets and words, therefore, Chinese characters might be considered figurative by their very pictureness. They are abstract and not abstract at the same time—they themselves are a kind of 'middle way' between words and pictures.

Art, Politics and the Anxiety of Influence

It is not a new phenomenon in the world of art that artists come into conflict with so-called authorities. But there are conflicts and then there are Conflicts with a capital C. Western countries had conflicts between artists and the Church in Catholic Europe, and between the Salon and modernism in nineteenth-century France. In the first half of the twentieth century conflicts with more dire consequences between totalitarianism and the avant-garde erupted in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The conflicts in the United States, usually more ridiculous than dangerous, arose between the avant-garde and the family values community that objected to government funding of art they found offensive, and so forth. Furthermore, just as artists in China have to come to terms with a relationship to their own history, so western artists have a long-standing relationship to the Classical tradition. That, in itself, is a powerful force in the history of art and one that some artists assimilate and others rebel against.

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[18] Vine, p. 18.
[19] Vine, p. 18.

In China, however, the conflicts are exacerbated by their very uncertainty. In Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, the rules were clear—if you wanted to make avant-garde art, better to have left town. But the Chinese government keeps changing its mind. Before around AD 1000, most art in China was made on commission. Beginning with the Song Dynasty, a market, which was assisted by printing, emerged.[20] During the Ming Dynasty, the market expanded, dealers entered the art scene, and books about artists were published. Calligraphy, considered an elite art form from the Shang Dynasty, was seen as connecting the writer and reader through a means of communication with "higher spiritual powers."[21] As a result, artists using 'pseudo-calligraphy' are challenging tradition.

Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang challenges tradition in a new way, and to a great extent he has been able to elude the inhibitory effects of the changeable repressions of government authority in China. Melissa Chiu, in "Chineseness as International Style in the United States,"[22] discusses the life and work of Cai, providing a number of salient quotations from the artist that help to explain his genius for synthesis and the ways in which his art has been fuelled by his life.

Cai expanded the use of materials from gunpowder, which was invented by the Chinese, to Toyota engines, boats, arrows, inks, paper, fuses, fireworks, and many others. His versatile style of thinking and the wide variety of his iconography have been played out, like the art of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, on a world stage. His four primary types of artworks are gunpowder drawings, installations, explosions and social projects.

Cai was born in 1957 in the coastal city of Quanzhou, in Fujian Province. Since he grew up on a coast, he was always aware of the sea, a world outside his own, and the potential for travel. His father managed a local bookstore, which exposed Cai to foreign authors who were usually unavailable to the general public in China. "When I was a little boy," he said in 2000, "I used to indulge myself in wild flights of

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[20] Clunas, p. 173.

[21] Clunas, p. 136.

[22] See Melissa Chiu, "Chineseness as International Style in the United States," chapter 3 in *Breakout*, Edizioni Charta, Milano, 2006.

fancy. The more they forbade me to think, the more irresistible my impulse to dream was."[23]

As a child, Cai studied Chinese calligraphy and ink painting and later western media and stage design. He graduated from the Shanghai Drama Institute, learned to make fuses and work with gunpowder, and in 1986 went to Japan. There he engaged in performance art, which he staged using a wide-ranging series of iconographic sources from Chinese tradition to Buddhism, to Maoism, to fireworks.[24] Since Quanzhou was itself a city that tolerated different religions—Taoism, Islam and Christianity, as well as Buddhism—Cai's background was one that included assimilation. Quanzhou was also the port from which Marco Polo sailed in 1292 when he left China and returned to Venice. This event informed Cai's *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* for the 1995 Venice Biennale. He forgot, in Cai's view, to bring back the 'eastern spirit'. And indeed, as Mary McCarthy wrote in *Venice Observed*, to the outside world the Venetians "had a name for sharp dealing, for 'sticking together,' artful diplomacy, business 'push,' and godless secularism . . ."[25]

In a coastal town, boats would naturally be a presence, and, in fact, the boat became one of Cai's iconographic motifs. It alludes to travel, to cross-cultural contact and trade, and is also a vessel that opens up other creative avenues. Quanzhou was located across the sea from Taiwan, and as a child Cai heard and saw the shelling of Nationalist forces on the island of Kinmen. He recalls the alarms set off during air raids—"Taiwanese fighter planes flying through the sky and the smoky lines of their trails would be mixed with the smoky lines of bombardment from the ground."[26]

The relationship of these bombardments to Cai's later work is readily evident in his many works involving explosions, from gunpowder drawings to firework displays. "I like the hazard of working with gunpowder," he has said. "It excites me."[27]

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[23] Cai, in *Cai Guo-Qiang. I Want to Believe*, Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe, Guggenheim Museum Publications, Exhibition in New York February 22–May 28, 2008; Guggenheim Bilbao, March—September 2009, p. 280.

[24] *I Want to Believe*, p. 11.

[25] Mary McCarthy, *Venice Observed*, Harcourt Inc., San Diego, New York and London, 1963 edition, p. 36.

[26] Cited in Chiu, p. 93.

[27] Cited in Chiu, p. 94.

Cai's continued interest in explosiveness has iconographic meaning. It relates to Chinese tradition and to his personal experience, and it also speaks to an aspect of creativity. The old adage 'you have to break eggs to make an omelet' well applies to the art world. For to create something new, one has to break through the old. In the case of Cai, he left his country for Japan in 1986, and he moved to New York in 1995. His *Projects for Extraterrestrials* are, according to Chiu, "intimately linked to his diasporic experience."[28] (Having achieved international success, Cai was able to return to China and work there, and he participated in the 2008 Olympics held in Beijing.) He thus broke through restrictions on travel and on the avant-garde in China; he makes use of traditional media, but also uses new media and has reinvented traditional iconography.

His *Projects for Extraterrestrials* are also linked to transitional spaces between China and the rest of the world, between the planet Earth and the universe, and between creative and destructive forces that fascinate the artist. In this last opposition, Cai literally 'plays with fire', but he also controls it. As such he is both a playful child and a creative adult in control of his media, a necessary combination for producing significant art. Compare Charles Baudelaire: "… genius is childhood recovered at will—a childhood now equipped for self-expression, with manhood's capacities and a power of analysis that enables it to order the mass of raw material … "[29]

In one of Cai's most dramatic explosion performances, the 1993 *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No 10,* gunpowder fuses ran ten kilometers from the western end of the Wall. Cai lit the fuse after dark and produced a fifteen-minute explosion. In so doing, he temporarily extended the length of the Wall, which was originally built to keep out invaders and isolate China. The content of this performance speaks to the historic isolation of China, as if it too is another world.

At the same time, the undulating line of the Great Wall has a serpentine quality, related to the Chinese dragon motif. By igniting the gunpowder, Cai seems to awaken a sleeping dragon, if only for a short time. Consistent with this was the preliminary drawing for the project that occupied a twelve-panel folding screen. He took a related notion

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[28] Chiu, p. 92.

[29] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life,* cited in Barbara Rose, *Oldenburg for the Museum of Modern Art,* Greenwich CT: Museum of Modern Art, 1970, p. 19.

westward when he planned to demonstrate the path of an ascending dragon upwards along Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire. On the drawings for this project, Cai wrote that dragons stand for the power of nature, embody the human wish to fly, and reach beyond the Earth's limits toward the universe.[30] The phallic meaning of this iconography is, of course, inescapable.

For Cai's installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Lyon, also in France, the artist was given two floors, one above the other. Below he created a winding dragon-like river along which visitors could ride in boats. Above he created a roller-coaster track with a tram that moved when music played. Stretched under a glass ceiling were elements taken from twentieth-century French art—Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, his *Urinal-Fountain*, and figures inspired by Yves Klein and Jean Dubuffet, among others. "The West," wrote François Jullien in the catalogue for the exhibition, "has freed him [Cai] … from the weight of Chinese codifications . . . "[31]

The combination of the dragon motif, the passion for explosions, for color and light, and for treading the line between control and lack of control is imbued with sexual meaning that Cai transforms à la Sigmund Freud into powerful aesthetic form. His genius for doing so was encouraged by what he reports about his relationship to his father and the fortunate context of his childhood.

Quanzhou, being somewhat off the beaten track of the relentless Red Guards, was spared much of the cultural destruction they visited on their country. Temples survived, acupuncture was practiced, and traditional myths and ghost stories were in the air. Despite upheavals throughout China, Cai's family was relatively stable, in part because his father was a member of the Communist Party. But he was a scholarly person who worked in a bookstore, practiced the art of calligraphy, and made traditional ink paintings.

The role and character of Cai's father thus placed his creative son in an advantageous position. He provided a sense of stability in a period of great turmoil and, though a member of the reigning, and repressive, Communist Party, he was well aware of the cultural genius of China's past. Alexandra Munroe quotes Cai as follows: "[My] family was always talking about the grandeur and accomplishments of Chinese

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[30] Michelle Yun, in *I Want to Believe,* p. 96.

[31] François Jullien, "La grande image n'as pas de forme (The Great Image has No Form)" in Cai Guo-Qiang, *Une histoire arbitraire (An Arbitrary History)* Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, 31 Octobre 2001–6 Janvier 2002, p. 31.

culture and civilization … " But, he continued, the divide between great art and unrest in Chinese society "created a natural rebelliousness in me. I wanted to follow Western tradition in oil painting and sculpture, and be influenced by Western thought. Now, looking back, I see I've inherited some of my father's scholarly thinking: Chinese cultural tradition has already unconsciously become part of me."[32]

For Cai, Mao was at first "the transcendent master of a vast revolutionary enterprise. ." an "idol" and "God-like … His [Mao's] artistic talent, calligraphy, poetry, military strategies, philosophy, essays, and revolution movements deeply influence my generation, despite the fact that later on we all started to question his ideologies."[33] Cai's affinity with some of Mao's political aims can be seen in the 1965 *Rent Collection Courtyard,* a kind of Socialist Realist sculptural installation that shows peasants suffering under the Guomingtang. Early on, therefore, Cai could identify with Mao as a powerful leader who had to destroy the past in order to create a better future. Similarly, he could identify with his father as an artistic, scholarly person in contact with the outside world through books. He could also renounce his identification with Mao when it threatened his creative freedom.

For Cai, creative freedom included the space to 'dream' and to make his dreams a reality. And generally that meant some combination of the past and the transformation of the dreams into something new. Like Brancusi, who made a watercolor of himself as a smith and polished bronze until it shone like gold, Cai called his work "a kind of alchemy—using different elements that do not necessarily relate, to make something new."[34] The fact that one of his elements is gunpowder reflects this very notion. Exemplifying this is his series of gunpowder 'portraits', created by placing gunpowder and fuses on fiber paper and then igniting them. The results have the quality of the Shroud of Turin; the figures are there and not there at the same time.

Fuelling Cai's genius is this very ability to 'navigate' between opposites, to control contrast, and to emerge with new creative expressions. Certainly he had to leave China to achieve this; once this was achieved, he could return. Nevertheless, artists in China have a tough row to hoe, as the effect of unpredictable government intervention in the arts can destroy all but the most determined and talented artists.

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[32] Alexandra Munroe, *I Want to Believe*, p. 26.
[33] Monroe, *ibid.,* p. 27.
[34] Cited by Chiu, p. 98.

The 'anxiety of influence' in China thus has many more layers than it has had in the west. Western artists have, as stated above, to deal with the classical tradition, as well as with various forms of repression. They also have a clear artistic genealogy that can function oedipally. Examples of this abound in the history of western art. Giotto drew a fly on the nose of one of his teacher's figures and fooled him into thinking it was real—symbolically 'thumbing his nose' at his artistic father. Henry Moore told the story of his decision to become a sculptor: he heard that when an observer criticized a sculpture of an old faun by Michelangelo for having all its teeth, Michelangelo agreed and knocked a few out. Moore gathered from this anecdote that Michelangelo was not so god-like that he could not take constructive criticism from a viewer. This freed him from the inhibiting force of a predecessor he could never hope to surpass. Similarly, Brancusi said that he would not want a work by Michelangelo in his room. His 'moi', said Brancusi, would be overwhelming.

In the west, anxiety of influence seems more straightforward than in China, where, in addition to art traditions, the state looks over the shoulders of the artists. This makes real artistic freedom impossible. The effect is virtually to force the avant-garde Chinese artist to elude the repressiveness of government oversight not only by looking westward but also by moving westward. The government of China is, of course, doing itself and its citizens, not to mention its artists, an enormous disservice by limiting the freedom of its artists. It is difficult enough to find new expressive forms with great predecessors symbolically looking over one's shoulder without a repressive government doing so as well. As it is, the imagined oedipal threat of a great predecessor can inhibit an artist, but when the threat becomes real, the inhibition is magnified. In China, artists have not only the venerable tradition of their own past art to deal with, but also the political present, which is rather changeable, and defying authority can have serious consequences. This state of affairs intensifies the anxiety of influence and shrinks the artist's creative space.

IMAGE-FABRICATION AND CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN CHINA

Wang Chunchen

I. *The Methodization of Image-Fabrication*

In her 1980s thesis entitled "Photography After Art Photography," the renowned American art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau discussed the challenges facing the traditional definition of photography. Such challenges arose at the 1977 *Mirrors & Windows* exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that included the three contemporary artists Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, and Andy Warhol. This exhibition marked a change in the production methods of photography and in modes of viewing, realizing the transition from production to 'image-fabrication'.[1]

The transition spread from its inception in *Mirrors & Windows* throughout the rest of the world of art. It has been since the 1990s and throughout the early twenty-first century that this transition of photography has borne fruit in China, establishing the characteristics of contemporary photo-imagery art. This is the change from the machine

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[1] The definitions of photography (*she4 ying3*) and imagery (*ying3 xiang4*) in modern art are different in Chinese and English. The Chinese word for 'photography' indicates the function of recording news images, whereas the Chinese word for 'imagery' has many connotations. *Ying xiang* can be used for the creation of all kinds of images. It allows the definition of 'photography' to be taken a step further so that photography in the context of art forms has a new meaning. Contemporary thinking surrounding photography, digital media art, and moving video art, therefore, now includes all forms of these new art media. In English, the one word 'photography' is often used to describe the different contexts in which the Chinese words for both 'photography' and 'imagery' would be used.

The word *ying xiang* (imagery) in Chinese has no counterpart in English. English has 'art photography', yet it is not clear whether or not the value of art photography is a value that belongs only to photography. A different expression, 'photo-imagery art', has strong support. 'Image art' is a relatively expansive term but does not describe adequately the Chinese *ying3 xiang4* (imagery). There is a term 'photographic imagery' in English, and so we have adapted this idea of *ying3 xiang4* (imagery or image art) to the term 'photo-imagery'. This, we believe, gives a better understanding of this art form and resolves this linguistic problem.

production of an image to an artist's fabrication of it. The ability of photography to capture a moment in an image has meant that it has recorded moments of time as well as space and evidence of scenes ever since its birth. Shortly thereafter, photography began to serve a legal and official function as a means of recording evidence or retaining moments in history. It has also become useful to tourists, immigrants, and ethnographers. By recording anecdotes and exotic things it has become a powerful tool for research in ethnography, the geographic environment, and local conditions. In short, it has enriched people's view of the world. Also, through its use in the media, photography has helped the modern media industry to flourish. Due to the impartial and objective nature of photography, the media industry has stipulated that images taken by photojournalists may not be altered in any way. This is a guiding principal of the news photography profession, which, even as it guides the profession, raises the issue of photography and truth.

There is another aspect to this, however. Ever since its invention, in light of people's continued search to express themselves and their thirst for a medium to explain the unknown world, photography's contribution to consciousness has been accompanied by the development of technology in photography. In fact, so much so that over the last almost two hundred years of photographic history—since the invention of photography in 1839—photography's contribution to consciousness has become its mainstay. From the end of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, as was mentioned in the beginning of this essay, a new form of photo-imagery art has been borne out of this change in photography's emphasis from the world to the mind. From its original function of recording facts to its transition to the conscious manipulation of its subjects and its manipulation of consciousness—becoming an artistic medium with an independent methodology—photography has brought a new and burgeoning method of expression to the development of contemporary world art. The relationship between photography and photo-imagery is not simply semantic. It provides a penetrating look into the re-conceptualization of art: photo-imagery has entered the consciousness of artists to become a stage in the process of creation. ('Photo-imagery' is being used for the Chinese word *ying xiang*, which can be used for the creation of all kinds of images.)

Photography has changed to become the art of photo-imagery. Through generations of dedication, development, and debate, photo-

imagery has established itself as an independent medium of art. There are still some people, however, who are hesitant to validate photo-imagery as an art or even to mention the source of this validation. As early as 1856, the French romantic artist Eugène Delacroix exclaimed that the birth of photography had come too late: it would have been better had it come many years earlier. In the early period, debate raged over the superiority of photography or painting. Later, the debate concerned the value of the artistic aura (painting) in an age of machine-reproduction (photography). Finally, this debate moved towards the difference between photography as a tool for on-the-spot news recording and as an artistic medium and towards how photography can itself become an independent art form. It was through this final debate that photography became a completely independent genre within art itself.

Chinese photo-imagery art, like that of other countries, stems from what is brought to it by professional artists. As far as plastic artists are concerned, the original significance of photo-imagery was not as a technique or a goal, but as an embodiment of their desire to supersede the traditional medium of art in order to realize their artistic intentions and ideas as contemporary artists. The behavior and expression of later artists bore the marks of those who had preceded them. Since there existed no obstacle to their desire, the thought of those artists who were already free of the weight of earlier traditional molds was ignited. Contemporary artists, now able to utilize photo-imagery as a medium of art, enriched photography as a tool of consciousness by developing a new and stable concept of photography. Thanks to this enrichment of the concept, photography is no longer thought to belong to an objective or abstract world. The new concept of photography projected by contemporary artists is that of an art of photo-imagery whose images are not just things seen, nor are photographs (photo-images) just reflections of an inert understanding of images. The art of photo-imagery surpasses our normal intellectual thinking and repeatedly emerges as a constant *method of visualizing and recognizing the world*. With this point in mind, the images of photo-imagery cease to be a simple mode of transfer or scenic sketching. They enter into the consciousness of an artist and artistic thought, changing the connotations linked with the visualization of objects. The effect has been that photo-imagery is becoming ingrained in people's intellectual thought. An independent consciousness of photo-imagery art has been born and is becoming a form with its own artistic value.

Photo-imagery art now has its own social function, with artists playing a special role in society. Photo-imagery has become an art of creation: photo-imagery artists have become independent in their thinking. They have become involved in changing social concepts by using imagery to activate thinkers who then are able to change their ideas. We can say that such photo-imagery art belongs to image fabrication. It is out of the ordinary, something created from nothing, from an idea, from a form, creating an image of how art can conceptualize the visible world.

Image fabrication is possible because it surmounts or surpasses conventional photography. Image fabrication is already more than merely machine-generated image replication: it is a projection of an artist's conscious thought. A new visual modeling has been established by image fabrication, one that has re-established how we visualize the world and has, at the same time, transformed our visual perception so as to alter our visual psychology. This is, therefore, re-establishing our existing method of apperception. Image fabrication is a method of superseding our familiar or conventional awareness that is emerging from the art of photo-imagery. This is due to the close relationship between the method of image fabrication and the re-visualization it brings about.

Methods of image fabrication developed out of photo-imagery art, signifying the in-depth transition and augmentation of art concepts as well as the independent and broad space of photo-imagery art. It is not only an artistic transformation in itself but is also a transformation of the contemporary world: a period of "changing the tides of imagery."[2] The world is a door: the methodology of image fabrication is the key to opening this door—mastering, advancing, coloring, beautifying, and empowering.

II. *Types of Image Fabrication*

Analysis of image fabrication as a method for expanding the applications of photo-imagery art has shown us both universal and conscious methods of image fabrication. This explains to some extent the collective behavior of contemporary photo-imagery artists. Image fabrication can be divided into the following five categories: digital fabrication;

[2] Mitchell, W.J., *Theory of Images*, translated by Chen Yongguo and Hu Wezheng, Beijing University Press, 2006, 2006, pp 2-25.

parody of fabricating borders; borrowing objects (scenery) to speak; appropriation and deconstruction; and thought generation.

1. *Digital Fabrication*

This is a work of photo-imagery that is borrowed from computer technology and image software. It successfully creates digital art imagery that leads to unprecedented visual experience and formal structure. Both spiritual and illusionary, this fabrication offers new perceptions and methods of world apperception and recognition. Its expression gives birth to a new form of artistic medium, exhibiting unpredictable space for the future—a watershed in the history of visual culture.

For example, Daniel Lee's *Source* demonstrates a void by turning the form of an organism into another form. Looking at each independently, the connection is illogical. Yet after seeing each image in sequence, the image of an organic chain appears. Whether this symbolizes the laws of evolution, only a scientist can say. Yet the artist is emphasizing the course of living organisms and presents a question as to whether they are connected in this way. The chain looks as if it is real, yet in reality the artist is raising even deeper questions about anthropology—about, for example, the possibility that there is this connection between life forms.

Miao Xiaochun's *A Study of Art History* series shows the qualitative transformation of the process of art history. The artist uses digital media, applying many types of computer image software, and organizes people and objects to create this masterpiece. What he did is akin to what Michelangelo did when he painted the Sistine Chapel, organizing and deploying a large team of painters, and it expresses the course of transformation in art history. Artists have been excessive in their reliance on the handling of their material to create art. The application of physical predicates in the perception of art—describing the smoothness or thickness of the paint on the canvas, for example—is related to this. With the fabrication of artworks by digitalized technology, the state and form of art creation changed completely. Digital art no longer has to do with the sense of touch and the deftness of one's hands, but with the knowledge of objects. Mathematical modeling and three-dimensional image fabrication are becoming better known and mastered. They are creating a new art form that goes beyond the body's sense perceptions. How can this digital art be appraised and how can its future be predicted? This will require more research and discussion to help us to understand the influences of the historical development

of this art. Digitalization will expand and enrich the use of image fabrication in contemporary art and diversify the methods used in this art.

In *Auspicious Crane Imag*e, Li Dazhe used the scroll painting of the same name by Song Huizong (1082–1135). He has taken traditional Chinese art images and transferred them to digital form, embedding contemporary visual complexities into his work in order to bring about a sense of newness to the art. Zhang Xiaotao spent two years in making a three-dimensional virtual artwork that describes an imaginary transformation of China's reality. Chen Zhuo and Huang Keyi use digital programs to fabricate new situations in Beijing. This new computer-generated art is very different from traditional art in terms of its methods of expression. This computer-generated expression, viewed as a visual image, not only expands the perimeters of art but also breathes new life into art by introducing a new topic for debate in contemporary art research.

2. *The Parody of Fabricating Borders*

The theories of simulacra and simulation of the post-enlightenment French philosopher Jean Baudrillard established the foundation of the 'new-world thought' of contemporary artists. One of the key characteristics of contemporary society is the unceasing reproduction of self-imagery. The significance of the self has developed within this imagery. The significance is that there is nothing to validate the existence of the self because, as Baudrillard said, the simulacrum is not what hides the truth; it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is truth. There is only the simulacrum or the image. There is no truth of which the image is an image. Due to the intervention of a few artists in photo-imagery art, massive changes have occurred in the appearance of contemporary photo-imagery with the result that today's photo-imagery art has superseded the patterns and limitations of photography. This has given photo-imagery its identification as an independent art form.

Chi Peng uses the Chinese legendary Monkey King image to break the time-space connection and forcefully interfere in non-logical life space. He adds absurdity and humor to life and clearly expresses the alienation of traditional culture along the path to modernization. Guan Shi's *Beam* (Figure 9) is taken from a form of Chinese traditional architecture. It analyzes the changes to Chinese society and how it has been severed from its past. *Beam* is a metaphor for the relationship

between China's modernization and its tradition. Cai Weidong's *The Eighth of the Twelfth Month of the Lunar Year* (Figure 10) puts the random naming of the work into the parody of the spectacle. This seems to reconstruct the historical moment by way of a scene that is both light and heavy and thus to inform people of a piece of forgotten history. It superposes and interlaces space with time in a way that is plausibly visionary and fantastic. Such pictures are never passive reflections, but are meant "to participate in another person's or thing's mortality, vulnerability, mutability."[3] The will of the artist strongly participates in the imagination of history so as to question plausible beliefs, thus manifesting the secret of the generation of concepts by photo-imagery art.

Liu Ren's *Dream Sleeper* and *Sleepwalker, The Forbidden City* (Figures 11 and 12) combine the real with the virtual and transform her young memories into dreams. She uses photographs taken at a site and then digitizes them to achieve vividly new spectacles that show a skillful mastery of image fabrication and the prospect of new media development. Shen Yang first sets up a virtual imaginary space and then puts props in the space by mixing posed photographs with psychological allegory. Allusion and symbolism become the features of her work, demonstrating the delicacy and sensitivity of new photographers. Lu Xiaochuan's *Last Supper* (Figure 13) appropriates a traditional western motif to embody a lamentation on the disappearance of Chinese rural culture and nature, alluding to a doubt about whether the rural civilization could be resurrected and resurged.

3. *Borrowing Objects (Scenery) to Speak*

This form of photo-imagery work is the easiest to confuse with traditional photography. On the surface are views, scenes, or images of people. However, in actual fact the image is not the passive record of what was already there in front of the camera but is the result of a meticulous choice, plan, and arrangement by an artist. The photograph, therefore, shows the thought and intention of the artist. For example, He Yunchang's *Rock Touring around Great Britain* has been organized with meticulous care as the first piece of action art. The artist first randomly picked up a rock from a beach on the east coast of England and carried it counterclockwise around the island of Great

[3] Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 15.

Britain from September 23, 2006 to June 14, 2007, finally returning it to its place of origin on the beach. Such a journey is akin to a child's adventure story, using the eyes of an out-of-town artist to view Great Britain, returning to nature for the first time, searching for consolation. He Yunchang here attempts to unravel the world mystery of the spirit and the body, allowing the frail body to dominate over the strength of the external world. He uses the solitary figure of the hero for evidence of the perseverance and determination of people, a determination that evokes a melancholy sound that reverberates through the vast fields of England, mysterious, charming, continuous. The rock is a symbol of this spirit and determination.

Yu Yang records in photographs the rapidly growing city of Beijing with images of the huge steel structure of the CCTV building (Figure 14), which has been a controversial project since its design. The building allegorizes the dramatic changes being made to Beijing's historic city skyline and what the changes portend for the future.

4. *Appropriation & Deconstruction*

Another characteristic of contemporary art is that it fosters a new way of thinking about tradition, history, and society and seeks to inquire about our place in the world. Using a few appropriated images, a lot of hard work has gone into this endeavor, which includes countering the attempts to cloud over it or ignore it. The use of this method focuses on using the characteristics of non-traditional photography—that is, contemporary photo-imagery art—to show photo-imagery as a free art that involves in-depth thinking, myriad visualizations, and a blend of styles.

For instance, Xu Changchang's *Mona Lisa* (Figure 15) uses a negative folding method to subvert historical understanding by revealing the complex relationship between art and reproduction as described by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and creating an uncertain form of vision thereby. The renowned Finnish artist Jorma Puranen aims to unravel the mysteries of the history of painting in a way that is akin to knocking on the door of art history. Knowledge of boundaries must be broken in order to grasp a deeper understanding of visual culture by creating and enriching messages from history.

Jia Youguang's *The World's Factory* (Figure 16) again raises the classic issue of art: the relationship between essence and truth. He transforms simulated objects—in reality a group of architectural models of the world's great buildings—into real (existing) art objects. In

doing this he questions the authenticity of the distinction between the two kinds of objects and demonstrates that the simulation of photo-images have value as art objects. Popular calendar and poster forms from the Shanghai of the 1920s and 1930s have influenced Shi Tou's works. Her reproductions capture the popularity of such items in everyday life. The artist combines modernist techniques and post-modernist methods of misappropriation in her work, which directs us to a kind of sentimental world.

Yo Bogong transforms his photo art into installations and pictures and makes it an all-round social art. This means that his photos do not provide the vision of a single image. *Ceremony*, *Mao and Marx*, and *Transformation* (Figures 17,18,19) are conceptual communications that refer to social issues directly. He breaks down images of the revolution by putting them into glassware, producing a renewed, deconstructive image unrelated to the original image. The new image is fragmented, its meaning broken. We can see the implied form within the glassware; its full composition is completed by our Gestalt ability. This implies that the revolutionary world has its own appearance because of our view of it. Were it separated from our sight, the images are just lonely and indifferent wares. The loftiness of revolution will hence be lost beyond these, its glass reflections.

5. *Thought Generation*

Thought comes first in this form of photo-imagery art. This and other types of photo-imagery art are united in that they are all conceptual. So why separate this type from the others? Mainly because it does not rely on outside objective imagery, but uses the expression of its artist's thought itself to create an image of thought independent of any other kind of images. This form of photo-imagery art does not use photography as its partner. It is the product of nothing but its own thought. An example is Chen Weiqun's *10* (Figure 20). This piece shows the irony of contemporary art's self-fabrication and self-wording in forming reproductions of the course of modernism in art history. Simultaneously, the continual re-production or re-vision of history signifies the uncertainty of the future of contemporary art. The works of the *10* series have become substantial evidence of the ambiguity or undecidability in the history of modernist art. Bai Yiluo attempts to use a non-living unit to compose life, utilizing ambiguous views to show life in its completeness and indecipherable symbols to indicate the limitlessness of fate.

The different types listed above have been roughly divided into groups. In fact, each type includes elements, either significant or subtle, of other types, especially with regard to the element of thought. Artists are most concerned with how thought can be expressed. They assiduously use the perspective of thought—regardless of scene-fabrication, performance, the incidentals of execution, et cetera—to finally transmit and record an image. This is why photo-imagery artists refuse to be labeled as photographers. It is only the shooting and printing—not all digital art requires shooting, but all requires digital printing—borrowed from photography by photo-imagery artists that align the two. The several groups of photo-imagery art merely seem similar to the medium of photography. Likewise, conceptual photo-imagery cannot be evaluated in terms of the traditional standards of the techniques used in photography. The opposite is in fact the case: traditional standards are evaluated and changed by conceptual photo-imagery. They evolve into the contemporary art theories that are then used as the criteria by which photo-imagery art is evaluated.

Image fabrication as a methodology clearly shows the state and characteristics of photo-imagery art. It can also reflect the psychology of contemporary society, and it can, as well, enable one to enter the society, the consciousness, and the creativity of a photo-imagery artist.

III. *Conclusion*

Contemporary photo-imagery art has entered a period of maturity and perceptive development to form a coherent practice. Contemporary Chinese photo-imagery artists have also become a force. The image fabrication movement has coincided with the creation of a methodology in this field. Due to Chinese photo-imagery artists becoming important in the world of international photo-imagery, more and more attention and focus have been given to this field. This is with regard not only to international exhibitions, but also to private collectors, museum collections, and the like. Also, due to the assiduousness of Chinese artists, their style of image fabrication and its methodology have in fact received much praise, becoming increasingly contemporary and thought-oriented in its nature. In addition, due to the international nature of their art, the artists are becoming more and more influential in the development of art in general. Photo-imagery art is, therefore, an important topic within the context of the history of art.

CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART: FROM DE-CHINESENESS TO RE-CHINESENESS*

Liu Yuedi

Since the beginning of the new millennium, issues concerning the ethnic identity and cultural identity of Chinese contemporary art have stood out in China. As its name indicates, Chinese contemporary art can be analyzed into two parts: Chinese and contemporary. However, the former part—rather than the latter part—has become something hotly disputed. Why is this happening? The answer may be this: whether inside or outside of the Chinese art circle, concerns with the national and cultural identities of art (Chinese/Non-Chinese) have prevailed over those that once distinguished its era (Contemporary/pre-Contemporary).

From 1978 to 2008, Chinese contemporary art has evolved along the path from de-Chineseness to re-Chineseness; in other words, it has undergone a historical process from de-contextualization to re-contextualization. This is because Chinese art, with its revived self-consciousness, is now trying hard to return to its original context, which had long been disfranchised by the western artworld. Interestingly, the search for re-Chineseness or re-contextualization is occurring in an age of globalization: while Chinese art develops synchronously with global art, the concept of Chineseness has become increasingly important. At the same time, the idea of producing real 'Chinese' artworks has become fundamental to contemporary artists.

Evidently, what has happened to Chinese contemporary art has much to do with the transformation of Chinese society in the past thirty years. As T. W. Adorno argues in the prelude of *Aesthetic Theory*, the productive process of art is a twofold essence, that is, a dialectical unity of autonomous entity (in a Durkheimian sense of the term) where artists independently determine the directions of art, and social fact where societal forces perform this function.[1] The same can be said

* This article first appeared in *Art and Social Change*, ed. Curtis L. Carter. Vol. 13 of International Association for Aesthetics Yearbook of Aesthetics, 2009 and is reprinted with the kind permission of the editor and publisher.

[1] T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 8.

of art consumption. The production and consumption of Chinese art were not independent during most of the twentieth century. Instead, they were absolutely subject to dogmatic Marxism from 1949 to 1978, as a consequence of which the theory of social reflection (which demands that art must reflect realistic society in the style of realism) had dominated Chinese aesthetics as well as art theory and practice for more than three decades. After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese art began to shift its standpoint from social fact to autonomous entity. In the mid-1980s, it ultimately gained its autonomy, that is, "art's growing independence from society."[2] Despite the fact that Chinese art moved in another direction in the 1990s, the breaking away from centralized political uniformity, planned economy, and cultural hegemony, largely determined the development of Chinese contemporary art practice during this period.

Four Art Periods: from Socialist Realism to Postmodern Art (1978-2008)

Chinese contemporary art started in 1978, two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution. That year was a turning point in that it led to a new era when cultural confusion was clarified and conditions affecting the practices of artists were returned to normal. Thereupon, political obstructions were cleared away and a relatively free space was opened up for practicing art. From then on, Chinese contemporary art moved forward in an irreversible direction.

In the first art period (1978-1984) from the end of the Cultural Revolution until the eve of the 1985 Art New Wave movement, Socialist Realism was the sole leading art style or genre throughout this period. (However, this movement is not to be identified with cultural revolution art, whose illustrations featured images of Mao and other revolutionaries, images contrasting positive and negative characters, the symbolism of the color red, and propagandistic themes.) The reason for the change to the New Wave was this: the centralization of political power, as well as the absolutization of the planned economy, led to a simplified or one-dimensional culture. These factors in turn explain the dominance of Chinese Socialist Realism, as the genre of art was used to reflect Chinese social life. However, in the early

[2] *Ibid*., p. 320.

1980s, political standards were no longer the primary guiding force for art, and realist art had to justify its status.

During the second art period (1985-1989), from the 1985 Art New Wave movement to the China Modern Art Exhibition in 1989, Chinese contemporary avant-garde arts emerged for the first time. There were hot debates about the tension between art for society and art for its own sake. On the whole, artists as individuals gradually gained their independence from the nation-state, thus leading to the opposition between elite culture (the culture of independent artists and wealth) and national culture (state sponsored culture). As a basis for constructing the project of modernity in China, an important Chinese philosopher, Li Zehou, advocated a form of subjective thought originating from Immanuel Kant's philosophy. Li Zehou approached Kantian subjectivity from the perspective of Confucianism and also practical Marxism.[3] At this time, Chinese artists, who were motivated by humanist concerns, began to develop an interest in the autonomy of art and also in aesthetics.

The third art period (1990-1998) has two prominent characteristics: on the one hand, with the establishment of a Chinese market economy, mass culture (media driven popular culture) swept over and soon dominated the people's everyday life. As a consequence, elite culture, national culture, and mass culture constituted three separate yet interactive components of Chinese culture.[4] On the other hand, Chinese avant-garde art freed itself from another round of political pressure and became a powerful subversive force. Since the early 1990s, Chinese contemporary art falls into these categories: national art (artist groups belonging to all levels of artists' associations), Chinese academic art (most artists from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and other regional academies), and contemporary avant-garde art (the artist community in 798 Art Zone Beijing, the Song Village, and other urban fringes). Of these types of art, the third is not only non-governmental, but also non-academic generally, though some artists participate in more than one of these categories.

In the fourth art period (1999-2008) Chinese contemporary art has participated in the new context of globalization while also creating art

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[3] Li Zehou, *The Critique of Critical Philosophy: A Study of Kant*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1979.

[4] Wang Nanshi and Liu Yuedi, *Polyphonic Cultures: A Study on the Changing of Chinese Contemporary Cultures in Market Society*, Hebei: Hebei People's Press, 2002, chapter 4.

that is more distinctively Chinese, as well as being global. And postmodern art in China has ended its marginal place by becoming the first violinist. Whether considered as three dimensions of culture or three approaches to art, the relationship between globalization, postmodernism, and the new Chinese contemporary art are further consolidated. But at the same time, the gap between them grows more evident as Chinese contemporary art develops in its own ways. The result is inner tension in Chinese contemporary arts.

From a historical perspective, during 1978 to 2008 the development of Chinese art has been centered on Chineseness. In the first period, it continues to call for a unified national-art-form. From the second to the early part of the third period, Chinese art tends toward the west. Then it loses both its ethnic and cultural identities (from the late third to the early fourth periods), and begins the quest for a new Chineseness (from the late fourth period until now).

The issue concerning Chineseness did not arise at all in the 1980s, when Chinese art followed the guidelines of *Nationalization, Popularization and Sinicization*, as put forward by Mao Tse-tung in his "Yan'an Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (first presented in 1942).[5] Although Chinese oil painting had been influenced by the Wanderers and by critical realism in nineteenth century Russian art during this period, Chinese artists always gave priority to Chinese traditional plastic arts styles in their works.[6] *Sinicization* was a requirement for both the content and form of Chinese artworks. However, the situation was radically different after 1985. At this point, the Chinese contemporary art circle began to bid farewell to the past. Artists and cultural officials chose to be open to the western art world, and Euro-American avant-garde artworks were regarded as the single model for artists of the 1985 Art New Wave movement. Since western art as the Other was imported into China, avant-garde art, as well as other traditional Chinese arts, have been profoundly influenced by western art. As a result, Chinese avant-garde art climbed to the top in the third period. The result is a golden age for Chinese art as a whole, a period when nearly all of today's successful artists grew up and

[5] Mao Tse-tung, "Yan'an Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art", in *Mao Tse-tung, Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 3, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1953.

[6] Some Russian painters led by Ivan Kramskoi (1837-1887) formed the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions in 1870, and they were known as "Peredvizhniki" or "Wanderers" in English.

formed their mature styles. Note, too, that the social situation also contributed to the artists' success in two aspects: namely, the political pressure was still felt (the artists tend to rebel against such pressure), and the art circle was relatively free from commercialization (commerce didn't play a very important role in art). This situation allowed art the freedom to develop according to its own rules.

Despite its progress, however, it is ironic that as a result of its involvement in globalization, Chinese contemporary art should lose its creative power. Notwithstanding its success in the global artworld, bringing to China an excellent worldwide image, Chinese contemporary art has nevertheless been widely demonized. Demonization refers to a process in which Chinese art is impeded by perceptions or actual circumstances imposing limitations on its development.

The Origins of Demonization: from Political Ideology to Market Ideology

An interesting debate concerning the worldwide demonization of Chinese art was brought to the table in 2008. One side thought that such demonization had done great harm to Chinese art, while the other side argued that, if Chinese art wants to be internationally recognized, it undoubtedly has to come through the necessary phase of demonization.[7] It's a pity that both sides did not go further to ask: what are the origins of the demonization of art? And to ask even further questions such as: who does the demonization and who is demonized? Before answering these questions, I will make three points about the origins of the demonization of Chinese art:

(1) The demonization of Chinese art had its origins in the era of the cold war, but it has been extended to the era of globalization. It represents a direct shift in perception from politics to art.

(2) The demonization was rooted in political ideology, but it has continued in the market ideology of global art. It represents an indirect shift from politics to art by way of commerce.

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[7] Zhang Xiaoling, "Who to Produce the Demonization for China?"; Wang Yuechuan, "The Demonization for China and the Identification Crisis of Contemporary Art"; Liu Yuedi, "Demonization: Who and/or Whom? "; Tang Jianjun, "The Necromancy and the Demonization"; Zou Yuejin, "China Has its Own Orientalism"; Liu Pei, "Demonization on Demonization's Backside", all in *Art Observation*, 2008 (4).

(3) The demonization was based on a misunderstanding originating from outside Chinese art culture, but, for most Chinese artists, it results in a negative identity in the sense of Carl Gustav Jung's collective unconscious.

First, the demonization of Chinese art is rich in political significance. Many foreigners, whether inside or outside of the art circle, understand Chinese art in terms of political ideology; in their eyes, China remains a red state, complete with the traces of the cultural revolution. Second, economic factors play an important role in demonizing Chinese art. What kind of art is sought by international curators and art institutions? This is a big issue. In the final analysis, such demands are not the main concern of global art dealers. Instead, supply and demand rest with the buyers' market: what kinds of art can satisfy art purchasers? Lastly, demonization is associated with the artists' creation. In Chinese contemporary art, there is always a crucial tension. On the one hand, the question is: what do the artists want to do? On the other: what do the buyers want to see? Consequently, under the control of the invisible hand (Adam Smith's term), it has become more important for contemporary artists to do for the other rather than do for themselves.

If things continue in this direction, the authentic local artistic tradition (say, of an eastern country) is in danger of being replaced by western influenced Chinese arts, the invader. As an example, consider Bali's indigenous art. It vanished simply because Batuan painters devoted themselves to depicting ethnographic scenes at the invitation of some western anthropologists. As another example, in the past century, South American art (say, Brazilian art) tried to imitate European mainstream art to the extent that it abandoned its own traditions. But interestingly, because these artists' imitations of European styles were so poor due to a special local accent, their misunderstood imitations were taken as indigenous originals. Chinese art may not necessarily suffer the same fate as Bali's indigenous art, but it may experience what has happened to Brazilian art. Some Chinese artists go out of their way to imitate the western art, and sometimes their imitations are so unsuccessful or ineffectual as to take on an indigenous peculiarity. Nevertheless, unlike east European contemporary artworks that shunned political issues after the pulling down of the Berlin Wall, Chinese contemporary art always has its political concerns. This tradition continued throughout the twentieth century.

Return to the previous questions of who does the demonizing and who is demonized? Of course, the current demonization came from outside; yet the identity conditions from inside China were also conducive to it. The demonization from the other is not strange for Chinese art, but demonization coming from itself is more noteworthy. In any event, to the question "who is demonized?" the reply is this: what is demonized is none other than the state of Chinese art itself.

At present, the context of Chinese art is very similar to the 'bad aesthetic times' (Elizabeth Frank's coinage) that Arthur C. Danto described in 1989 in these words:

> The irony is that these feelings arise against a background in which, in every other way, the times are very good for art: there are more art magazines; more interest than ever before in what artists are doing; more galleries and more museums; incredible prices at auctions even for living artists; more art schools turning out more artists who see art as a viable profession like dentistry or accounting; more money all around. And yet, while the engines of the art world turn furiously, the output has been aesthetically stalled for two decades, and if there is any direction to speak of, it is that of bad aesthetics: the badness of the times seems not merely that so much spectacularly bad painting seems to crowd the exhibition spaces of the world.[8]

Although Danto addresses the situation in the western artworld in the 1980s and the 1990s, his description also fits the reality of Chinese art as developed since 2000. Over the past few decades, Chinese contemporary artists have acquired more and more freedom, and they were able to make use of all kinds of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern images free from political pressure. However, with the aesthetization of everyday life in contemporary culture, artists begin to argue against the autonomy of art (after previously deviating from the social determinism of art) and seek to establish intimate connections between art and ordinary lives.[9] They either quest for newness in art directly (the newest is the best in their minds) or actively accept the guidance of the market in a cooperative relationship with curators and critics.

As a matter of fact, the market is a two-edged sword for Chinese art. On the one hand, market factors gradually push art to abandon the

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[8] Arthur C. Danto, *Encounter & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 297.

[9] Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Sage Publications,1991, pp. 65-72. See also: Wolfgang Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*, London: Sage Publication Ltd, 1997, pp. 1-32.

planned economic system and traditional academic system. As a product of a planned economy, Chinese artists' associations are neither NGO (non-governmental organization) nor NPO (non-profit organization) in nature, but are built up and supported entirely by government. In addition, Chinese art academies and institutes are all based on a combination of the Yan'an art academic tradition from the 1940s and the European academic tradition from the nineteenth century. On all accounts, the Chinese art circle leads to diversity in resisting the supremacy of the political system, and this is entirely a good. But on the other hand, the market system generates a new cultural hegemony and a specific market ideology for Chinese art. As Curtis L. Carter describes rightly,

> The market offers a temptation to artists to produce works that satisfy a global market demand irrespective of their artistic significance. This matter is of increasing concern as young artists barely out of art school are drawn into the booming market for contemporary Chinese art before they have time to reflect on and develop their ideas and talents.[10]

In fact, such developments do not improve the state of Chinese art, for Chineseness is necessarily diminished by abuses in the local and global markets.

Three Cultural Symbols: Traditional, Political and Commercial Images

In contrasting western and Chinese cultural contexts, we can see that Chinese contemporary art centers on three forms of cultural symbolism or cultural types. These cultural symbols or types are reflected in the works of Chinese artists today. According to their historical sequence, I refer to them as the images of traditional culture, political culture and commercial culture. The three correspond roughly to the Chinese classical tradition before the nineteenth century, the Chinese revolutionary state in the twentieth century, and the conditions of the market since the 1990s. Here I refer to them as representing three forms of demonizing with respect to Chinese art.

The first type of Chinese cultural symbolism derives mainly from the images of traditional culture. It has a special appeal to those who are interested in Chinese classical tradition. For such persons, artistic

[10] Curtis L. Carter, "Avant-garde in Chinese Art" in this volume.

images must be able to satisfy their cultural imagination. Traditional images are various, such that they not only include the Chinese traditional literati artistic and cultural symbols that have already fused into folk culture (say, Chinese calligraphy, literati painting [especially of Chinese Southern School], the rockery in Chinese gardens and the like), but also include the traditional references to Chinese block square characters, Chinese dragon, Kungfu's pose, stone lion, the Four Great Inventions, types of facial makeup in Beijing opera, Chinese traditional garments and shoes, cultural relics, and the like. All of the images are used in a contemporary cultural sense, with reference to Chinese traditional culture.

The second type of Chinese symbolism originated from the images of political culture. It can be argued that such images are even more common today than the other two types, as they cater to the spectator's political imagination in reference to Red China, as it had been since the cold war era. That is why political pop art flourished in the 1990s and exerted important influences. Also, the images of political culture are closely connected with a re-shaping of Chinese culture throughout the Cultural Revolution. Of course, political images are imbued with Chinese ideological significance due to the particular culture fostered by Chinese communism. For example, this culture includes youthful and older images of Mao, portraits of workmen or peasantry working in factories or on fields, depictions of the Red Guard participating in revolutionary movements, Tian'anmen square and other provincial red squares, red five-pointed stars and red flags, quotations from Chairman Mao and the little Red Book, the model opera and royal dance for Mao.

The newest images can be attributed to commercial culture. But notice they are not exact copies of Euro-American postmodern culture; instead, Chinese art is deeply motivated to determine how the western commercial culture came to be transmogrified or distorted in Chinese contexts. Thus, if a Chinese commercial image were similar to any in a western capitalistic milieu, it would be uninteresting for Chinese spectators. Hence, Chinese commercial images must differ from their counterparts in the west. Chinese city spaces with eastern style (high buildings and large mansions, streets and alleyways, building sites and city-village combination sections), together with the mass culture/creative cultural industry (Chinese singing stars and movie stars, escort girls in bars, Karaoke or KTV rooms, Super Girl TV program that is much like American Idol), show themselves in a socialist

market environment. Thus, from traditional to political to commercial culture, there are at least three forms of cultural symbolism informing Chinese contemporary art. Increasingly contemporary artists prefer to include these symbolic Chinese cultural symbols in their works.

Artists and Creation Space: Legislators and Interpreters, Public and Private Spheres

I would like to cite what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has said about the intellectuals' fate in modernity in his *Legislators & Interpreters* (1989)[11] to explain the transition in the identity of Chinese contemporary artists and to show the changes in artists' roles: "the fall of the Legislators" and "the rise of the Interpreters" (perhaps the roles of art theories by comparison.)[12]

Unlike current American art history research, one important theme in Chinese art history is the relationship between individuals and the nation-state. Although today's cultural studies, especially those based on gender (female/male) and race (black/white), have exerted an impact on American art history research, these topics are still marginal in China. During the first art period, the artists' actual and cultural identities were subordinate to the nation-state, and as professional artists they were supported by the state for more than thirty years. These older artists continued to construct a Chinese modernity that has remained unfinished since The May 4th New Cultural Movement in 1919. Artists during this era were charged with facilitating social responsibility based on didacticism in Chinese society.

More interestingly, the second generation artists who made their appearance in the 1985 Art New Wave movement also exhibited a great sense of social responsibility in their works, though they tried to go beyond the tighter restrictions imposed by the nation-state. They regarded themselves as social elites. Among other things, they advocated a humanistic spirit and rational painting (a special art style which presents a rational spirit and refuses emotionalism). Thus, they became the legislators for Chinese art. As a participant once said, the "1985 Art New Wave movement began as a form of Chinese human-

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[11] Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators & Interpreters*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, Chapter 8-9.

[12] Liu Yuedi, *After the End of Art: An Aesthetic Rethinking of Art's Duration*, Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House, 2006, p. 173.

ism … but later it soon turned into cynicism."[13] These artists committed themselves to expressing philosophical schemas in the language of painting, a practice often criticized as making thoughts loftier than the art vehicles used for their expression. However, when this 1985 generation of artists obtained greater freedom, they found themselves having much difficulty coming to terms with the new society.

From the beginning of the 1990s, a third generation of artists overthrew their forerunners' art propositions. Hence, Chinese political pop art rose to jeer and mock the mainstream political ideology. When Wang Guangyi appropriated and then collaged the cultural revolution and modern advertisement images on the same background, when Fang Lijun changed to create a series of bald-headed Beijingers, the new generation had actually given up their roles as legislators. Instead, they preferred to serve as professional art producers and count art as just a game. Ultimately, these artists treated themselves as interpreters of their private lives, but not as legislators of the society. They broke away from the nation-state, but divorced themselves from mass society at the same time. What distinguishes the third and final period of these changes in contemporary Chinese art is that, in the latter period, some prominent artists have found their way into the global artworld, where they participate in global trade and are perceived as global artists.

As we can see, the evolution of Chinese contemporary art follows the changing nature of Chinese society: it first freed itself from political uniformity, then headed toward an aesthetic Utopia, and then turned in another direction (neither political nor aesthetic). As for the cultural space where the creation of art takes place, art creation space has undergone a corresponding development: it has turned from the public sphere (not just in Jürgen Habermas' meaning), to the private sphere, and now to a third private-commercial or private-public sphere.[14]

In the 1980s, when Chinese artists wanted to show and promote their works, they mostly depended upon the public sphere whether actively or passively. In order for their works to be accepted by government and to be able to be shown in public, the artists were limited

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[13] Guo Xiaoyan & Shu Qun, "A Interview about '85 Art New Wave Movement", and Gao Minglu, *'85 Art New Wave Movement*, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008.

[14] Cf Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.

to presenting their products in national or local art galleries, as there were no private galleries at that time. But in 1979, artists affiliated with the Star Art School, the first art school in contemporary art history, exhibited their works in a public park beside the Chinese National Art Gallery. At the time, they had no access to the centre of the art circle. In order to show their art in a public place, the Star artists of 1985 themselves had to choose a public space on their own initiative. Instead of trying to present their art in an art gallery, as artists before them, the Star artists put their works on the street straightaway. A slogan from one of the artists expressed the spirit of the group: 'Art is possessed of life absolutely, and art is possessed of space absolutely!'

At the China Modern Art Exhibition in 1989, an infamous artist fired a gun to finish her work *Dialogism*. This famous event held back contemporary avant-garde artists' progress for a while. For a time, avant-garde artists were isolated from public space, and their works were withdrawn to the private sphere henceforth. But in the next stages of Chinese contemporary art, with recommendations from private art galleries and other art spaces, contemporary artworks were presented in public again. Some artists were fashioned into Postars (first advanced by Allan Kaprow). They displayed in their work the banal, the scatological, and the clever rather than the enigmatic, the sacred, and the creative.[15] A few Postars even ceased to be creative by setting up studios to produce mechanical reproduction of their works (similar to Andy Warhol). Thus, today's art creation focuses on the private sphere in content, while art's presentation is pushed into the public sphere, thus constituting a special combination of private and public spaces.

Again, from the beginning of twentieth century art history, while trying to keep pace with the modernity project, Chinese art was asked to carry out "the function of a this-worldly salvation."[16] For example, a famous Chinese modern aesthetician Cai Yuanpei brought forward a theory of "substituting aesthetic education for religion"[17] in 1917, and Chinese artists played the role of legislators till the end of the 1980s. Simultaneously, art in China became a so-called "autonomous cultur-

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[15] See Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

[16] H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills ed., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1946, p. 342.

[17] Cai Yuanpei, *The Complete Works of Cai Yuanpei*, Vol. 3, Hangzhou: Zhejiang Education Press, 1997, p. 58.

al field or institution."[18] This development may seem odd given that China's modernity project (not only directly about the Enlightenment aims of science, democracy, and progress, but also closely linked with the growing autonomy of knowledge and the transformation of social structures and culture) had not yet been completed. In fact, China had never witnessed a division of science (truth), morality (normative rightness), and art (authenticity or beauty) in Jürgen Habermas' meaning.[19]

Two Art Criteria: Creativity Rooted in Tradition, and Composite Meanings

What is a good Chinese contemporary artwork? How to evaluate Chinese contemporary artworks? Chinese aesthetics and art theory must try to answer such questions. There are at least two art criteria that I would like to propose: one is creativity rooted in tradition, and the other, composite meanings.

Danto's definition of art is related to both criteria. According to his minimalist definition, aboutness and meaningfulness are two necessary conditions for something to be an artwork. That is to say, at any rate, these two conditions combine to turn something into an artwork: "x is an art work if it embodies a meaning."[20]

Once Chinese contemporary art adopts these two criteria, it must be about something. But it is essential that Chinese art as Chinese art be about Chinese indigenous cultural traditions. Furthermore, this aboutness is not concerned with the tradition itself, but with a creative transformation of tradition or a new interpretation of it. (That means that we need a hermeneutics of the traditions of Chinese art). Recently, Chinese artist Xu Bing interpreted his art concept by saying, "the most important requirement" or the "top rule" for Chinese art is "creativity" that offers "an illumination for human being's thinking."[21] And, as his

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[18] Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 3.

[19] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project", in Hal Forster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetics: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983.

[20] Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2003, p. 25. Especially see Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

[21] Xu Bing, "My Art's Ways and Means", in *Decoration*, 2008 (4).

successful art practice shows, the creativity in question must also be rooted in different cultural traditions.

Further, art is expected to present meanings. As the title of his book *Embodied Meanings* (1994) shows, Danto perhaps pays more attention to meaning. Here, even meaning itself has its aboutness and is thus plural.[22] Therefore, from an inter-cultural or cross-cultural point of view, Chinese contemporary art may present various meanings, that is, what I call 'composite meanings'. Generally, the more multiplicity of meanings a Chinese artwork presents, the more interesting it is. A great number of works by Xu Bing are expressed in the English and Chinese languages. In an exhibition called *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* in New York (2007), he acknowledged that he had once tried, but failed, to produce works with only English characters in his work. However, when he presented his works with characters that looked like Chinese but were not Chinese, or those that were English but do not look like English (after 1994), his works began to present composite meanings from an inter-cultural or cross-cultural perspective. His conceptual work *Artworld* is a case in point, in which the viewers can recognize the English word A-R-T-W-O-R-L-D from what appears to be a Chinese character in appearance (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Xu Bing, Artworld, Conceptual art.

[22] Cf Arthur C. Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays & Aesthetic Meditations*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994.

Toward a Neo-Chineseness: Chinese Art not Just for the Sake of China

In any event, a realistic aim for Chinese contemporary artworks is to construct a neo-Chineseness. This task depends not only upon Chinese art practice, but also upon current Chinese aesthetics and art theory. Today, Chinese art practice is certainly ahead of Chinese aesthetics and art theory in this process. But in the context of Terry Eagleton's "post-theory" or "after theory",[23] the latter must make their contributions. However, some philosophers such as Danto actually discount the importance of eastern aesthetics:

> The definition of art as embodied meaning was meant to be true of every work of art, wherever and whenever it was made. If there are differences between eastern and western works of art, they cannot be part of art's essence. The difference between western and non-western does not apply. What we have learned since 1981 is not part of the theory.[24]

"Non-Western art", Danto continued, "is now part of world art. It will probably play a greater and greater role. Today, Chinese art is very much in demand in New York. So far, though, there has not been much impact by Chinese philosophy of art."[25]

In fact, Danto's theory concerning the nature of art turns a blind eye to the differences between eastern and western cultures. However, the concept of fine arts is for China just an exotic notion. In thinking about the essence of art, we have to consider the oriental traditional context. However, despite the fact that some eastern and western scholars have already done so, most art definitions offered by analytic aesthetics presuppose the western artworld, such that they overlook the non-western artworld or are reluctant to analyze how the oriental pre-artworld developed historically.[26] And it's a pity that Chinese artists and art theorists tend to follow Fredric Jameson's very famous claim concerning China that the west excels at theory, while the east excels at practice.

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[23] See Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, New York: Basic Books, 2003.

[24] Liu Yuedi, "Conversation with Arthur C. Danto," in Liu Yuedi, *The History of Analytic Aesthetics,* Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009, p. 420.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 421.

[26] Stephen Davies, "Non-western Art and Art's Definition", in Noël Carroll ed., *Theories of Art Today*, London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. See also: Liu Yuedi, *Living Aesthetics and Art Experience*, Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House, 2007, chapter 14.

Today, what the Chinese art circle demands is not only practice, but also art theory suitable for the Chinese context. Moreover, practice and theory must complement each other. According to the American philosopher Susanne K. Langer, "There are, for most ages, two main sources of information: what theories in a given time say about art, and what the artists of that time seem to assume."[27] Perhaps a mature Chinese art theory and aesthetics should be developed from information reflecting Chinese artists' practices and ideas instead of just following western definitions of art.[28]

With the increasing centralization of cultural symbolism (as I have mentioned), the artists have become increasingly free to develop their personal approaches to art and art spaces have become more open. But if Chinese contemporary art ultimately loses its Chineseness, how can one distinguish its ethnic and cultural identities? To sum up, if Chinese art is in danger of loosing its identity, it is now a necessary requirement for it to take measures to regain its identity, that is to say, to transform itself from de-Chineseness to re-Chineseness. Re-Chineseness is also a necessary step toward a neo-Chineseness in its meaning. This effort is not just for the sake of Chinese art, but also for the benefit of global art across the world. The more ethnic features art reflects, the more universally acceptable it becomes. Take a building for example, the more national flavor it reflects, the more attractive it will be to the world.

To conclude this paper, I will give an example to explicate the meaning of neo-Chineseness. The new media artwork *Flow of Qi (air)* was presented at the Ars Electronica Festival 2007 (with Shu-min Wu as conceptual and creative director). This new media artwork reflects an organic unity, HTDC, namely, an integration of both Hi-tech and Deep-culture. Deep culture is a reflection of art's Chinese cultural roots.

As an interactive installation, *Flow of Qi (air)* succeeds by blending its authentic Chinese deep culture into high technology. This work employs an ultra wide band (UWB) non-contacting sensor, together with a full and rich expression of the spirit of Chinese culture. A colleague and I participated interactively in this work in a closed space with a background of Chinese classic music. The two participants were

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[27] Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*, New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1957, p. 108.

[28] This volume hopes to make some contribution in this direction through dialogues between American and Chinese aestheticians and critics.

made to sit in front of a screen and to manipulate certain Chinese famous calligraphies projected on it. This process is controlled by the participants' breathing out and in with the aid of the UWB: one participant's breath controls the speed of handwriting, and the other's controls its force. So, with the help of high technology, this work can be said to exhibit what I mean by 'neo-Chineseness'. In other words, this new media art has grasped the essence of Chinese traditional culture, that is, the harmony between man and heaven and also body-mind syncretism. In this work, *Qi* as a Chinese philosophical term is exemplified in an extrinsic art media that facilitates communication between subject and object (calligraphy), but also functions as an intrinsic medium that puts mind and body in interaction. In any case, excellent works like *Flow of Qi (air)* are still rare, and Chinese art has a long way to go in its effort to reconstruct Chineseness through such creative transformations.

CHINESE WITHOUT CHINESENESS: CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART FROM CULTURAL SYMBOL TO INTERNATIONAL STYLE

Peng Feng

Chinese contemporary art emerged in the late 1970s. Some radical artists followed the avant-garde in the western art world to criticize the collectivism that had crested in China during the Cultural Revolution. The regenerative avant-garde in China at that time was still a kind of avant-garde, even if its original version in the west had lost its status as the contemporary art. This was the first stage of Chinese contemporary art. Since it had obvious political implications and was in the pop style, we can call it Political Pop. But after the initial excitement, some artists began to think about the problem of cultural identity and created works with distinctive symbols of China. They appropriated Chinese cultural symbols such as written Chinese characters, popular historical stories, unique philosophical ideas, and so on to label their work as Chinese. Chinese contemporary art came into its second stage. Since it uses Chinese cultural symbols and continues to adopt a pop style, we can call it Cultural Pop. Nevertheless, neither Political Pop nor Cultural Pop can satisfy the artists who are sensitive to the rapid change taking place in China and the world. Most of the issues that either Political Pop or Cultural Pop engaged are outdated, exaggerated, or trivial and bore the artists who are sensitive to the new situation. Some artists try to think and work without any prejudices and to initiate a new tendency, whose result, perhaps, can be called a new International Style.

Now, from my perspective, Chinese contemporary art comes to a new stage, i.e. the third stage, with the new International Style. In this paper I propose to argue that only in this new stage can, ironically, Chinese contemporary art find its identity. In other words, only contemporary Chinese artists who are no longer exclusively fascinated with their past tradition and cultural symbols can authentically respond to the present world and successfully revive their culture in contemporary life. Since in this new stage Chinese cultural identity is

substituted for a new International Style, it seems to be reasonable for us to call it Chinese without Chineseness. Let me take Xu Bing's art as an example to make out the case.

1

As one representative of Chinese artists born in the 1950s, Xu Bing got his art training in the former Soviet system, earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the Print Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing that prefers socialist realism to any kind of art form and style. Xu Bing was an excellent student and became a professor after graduation. However, he decided to do his own art and rebelled against socialist realism. About this change, Xu Bing says,

> That's because in Chinese art circles people know I have a very good foundation and understanding of traditional art and methodologies. My early works were very much built on that foundation, so when I began to incorporate more modern ideas and approaches, many people expressed regret because they felt I was taking a wrong direction…. Another major factor that influenced the change in my artistic direction in the mid-1980s was an exhibition of North Korean painting shown in Beijing. Most of the works were in the style of Socialist Realism, all bright flowers and smiling faces looking up at the Great Leader. Those works were like a mirror clearly reflecting what our own artistic environment in China had become. It was an opportunity to experience the realization that this art was a lot less intelligent than the eyes that were looking at it. I knew that I had to walk away from that kind of art and do something new, my own kind of art.[1]

According to socialist realism, art should come from and serve the people's lives. The best way for art to achieve this aim is by imitating and transfiguring lives. In a word, art should be a tool to educate people and to strengthen socialist ideology, and so art cannot be independent, pure, or autonomous. In the 1980s, avant-garde artists launched a movement to purify the language of art. This purification movement aimed at saving art from utility and substituting an art that was autonomous for the heteronomous social realist art. Even if autonomous art or 'art for art's sake' was an outdated idea at that time in the western art world where postmodern art had surpassed modern

[1] Glenn Harper, "Exterior Form—Interior Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing," *Sculpture* 22.1 (2003), p. 50.

art, it was still an avant-garde idea in China in the 1980s where the art circle was still dominated by socialist realism.

Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (Figure 2) created from 1987 to 1991 is representative of the purification movement. *Book from the Sky* is different from and better than the abstract painting practiced by many artists in the purification movement. *Book from the Sky* contains no readable characters. Therefore the pages do not make up readable books since all of the characters are invented by Xu Bing. In that sense, they are meaningless. They are not paintings, not even abstract paintings since they are actually books, unreadable books. Xu Bing spent four years doing this one meaningless thing. He intended to use this massive work that involved him in meaningless behavior for a long time to show that art is meaningless and to oppose to the idea of art supported by social realism.

Book from the Sky is a most appropriate and keen-witted way to show this meaninglessness. Since the only purpose of characters is to convey meaning, if they cannot reach their purpose, they are nothing useful. In *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing found the best way to show the conflict between meaning and meaninglessness. In a word, for the purpose of purifying the language of art, *Book from the Sky* is much more successful than abstract painting.

The Purification Movement cannot be understood as a movement of modern art, i.e. a movement of 'art for art's sake' or formalism because it has obvious political implication. Xu Bing admits that there are political elements in his works, even though his original intention was not political. As Xu Bing says to Glenn Harper:

> As an artist, I don't usually think about political factors when I create a work; I am focused on more concrete issues—the methodology I plan to use, what techniques will work best. But at the same time I believe that since Chinese society is such a politically charged environment, and since I grew up in that environment, it is unavoidable that political elements will emerge in my work.[2]

In short, through attacking socialist realism the Purification Movement aimed at subverting the whole socialist ideology. In this sense, we can regard Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* as a piece of Political Pop, even if it is not as unscrupulous or aggressive as most of the works of Political Pop. Nonetheless, I would like to take it as the representative of the

[2] Ibid., p. 51.

Cultural Pop, i.e. the representative of the second stage of Chinese contemporary art.

2

Xu Bing was born into an intellectual family. His mother is a professor of the Department of Library Studies, and his father chaired the Department of History at Peking University. Even if Peking University was one of the important arenas of the Cultural Revolution during 1960s, the cultural atmosphere was not totally dominated by the Revolution.

In his childhood, Xu Bing was strongly influenced by his parents and neighbors who were outstanding scholars in China. Xu Bing would have been very familiar with Chinese traditional books, which usually have string bindings and indigo covers, even if he could not read them. To the boy Xu Bing, the traditional books would have seemed to be books from the sky. I guess that Xu Bing was inspired by this special experience in his childhood to create *Book from the Sky*. He recalls that his parents "were both very busy when I was little, and so I was often locked in the library. Even though I was surrounded by books and language, I was too young to read."[3] In this sense, the motive of *Book from the Sky* would be cultural and personal rather than political. At least we can say Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* is at the point of transition from Political Pop to Cultural Pop.

As China continues to reform and meliorate its ideology and political structure, the basic contradictions are not the contradictions between socialism and capitalism but the contradictions between development of economy and preservation of culture. In order to develop economy, China should open and join in the economic globalization processes on the one hand, while on the other hand, she should keep her idiosyncrasy in order to keep her cultural identity. In 1990s, some sensitive artists realized that cultural identity would be more important than political reformation and chose cultural issues as the subjects of their art. Chinese contemporary art developed from its first stage to second stage, i.e. from Political Pop to Cultural Pop.

Although Cultural Pop artists' attitudes to Chinese culture are different from those of other artists or ambivalent, their strategy of choosing Chinese cultural symbols to show their Chinese identity is

[3] Xu Bing, "Interview from the MoMa Exhibition," New York: Canegie Hall, May 23, 2007.

not different. Chinese square characters and calligraphy are emblematical symbols of Chinese culture. Most artists use the square characters and calligraphy to show their Chineseness. Xu Bing and Gu Wenda are the initiators and most successful artists in this area. Some artists are successful in appropriating other Chinese cultural symbols in addition to square characters and calligraphy. For example, Cai Guoqiang uses Chinese gunpowder, Lv Shengzhong uses Chinese papercuts, Huang Yongping uses ideas from the *Book of Changes*, and so on to create many interesting works. But most of the Cultural Pop works are not attractive to Chinese audiences because Chinese audiences are familiar with the symbols in the works. For some Cultural Pop artists, the only purpose in appropriating Chinese cultural symbols is to show their Chineseness. But their Chineseness is not really a problem to Chinese audiences. Perhaps these works are attractive and interesting in foreign countries, but trivial and boring in China. Xu Bing's art is different from these superficial works. Xu Bing's works can show his Chineseness, but showing his Chineseness is not his purpose. The main purpose of Xu Bing's art is to resolve the problems in contemporary society. If, for example, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* did not have its political implication, it would not be a great work in the history of Chinese contemporary art.

In addition to the political reason, Xu Bing has a personal reason to do *Book from the Sky*. He recalls,

> My personal need to create the work was also related to a particular cultural condition and moment, prompted in the first place by my reaction against the post-Cultural Revolution 'cultural fever'.... I participated very actively in this trend: I was reading a lot and constantly engaged in discussions, but somehow I was falling too deeply into it, getting lost in it. I was increasingly put off and disappointed by the game of books and culture, like a hungry man who had eaten too much too fast and was starting to feel sick. It was as though I was stuck in some kind of video game loop, just going around in circles without achieving anything. My mind was confused, and I felt like I had lost something. I thought, "I need to make my own book to express my feelings toward books. I need to stop this endless game and do a concrete piece of work. I need to return to a calm, undistracted state of mind." And every day when I worked on those 'meaningless' characters, it was like having a dialogue with nature. There was no intrusion of knowledge or of argument. My thinking in turn became clean and clear. This was not about creating a piece of art, but about entering the realm of meditation.[4]

[4] Glenn Harper, "Exterior Form—Interior Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing," p. 49.

Xu Bing's attitude to 'cultural fever' is clearly not a political attitude but a cultural one.

3

When Xu Bing moved to United States in 1990, he realized that the significant thing was not to show his Chineseness but to do something toward helping communication between Chinese culture and western culture or toward mixing these two different cultures. In 1994, Xu Bing created a new writing system for English—what he calls *New English Calligraphy* or *Square Word Calligraphy* and made an installation with the name *Square Calligraphy Classroom* in Copenhagen (Figure 21). *New English Calligraphy* looks like Chinese characters but is actually English. It is a fusion of written English and written Chinese. The letters of an English word are slightly altered and arranged in a square word format so that the word takes on the ostensible form of a Chinese character, yet remains legible to the English reader. *New English Calligraphy* is different from *Book from the Sky*. *Book from the Sky* is meaningless to everyone, while *New English Calligraphy* is readable only to some. In order to understand and practice *New English Calligraphy*, Chinese readers have to learn English, while English readers have to be familiar with Chinese calligraphy. *New English Calligraphy* is a wonderful design that mixes Chinese and English and to enhance the communication between an English reader and a Chinese reader. Xu Bing says,

> *Square Word Calligraphy*….exists on the borderline between two completely different cultures. To viewers from these two cultures, the characters present equal points of familiarity and of strangeness. A Chinese person recognizes the characters as familiar faces but can't figure out exactly who they are. To a Westerner, they first appear as mysterious glyphs from Asian culture, yet ultimately they can be read and understood…. The absurdity of *Square Word Calligraphy* is that it takes two different words from two completely unrelated language systems and fuses them together into one entity. If you use existing concepts of Chinese or English to try and read or interpret these characters, you won't succeed. This total disconnection between outer appearance and inner substance places people in a kind of shifting cultural position, an uncertain transitional state.[5]

[5] Ibid., p. 47.

New English Calligraphy is not Xu Bing's first attempt to create a new form of writing by mixing English and Chinese. In 1991, Xu Bing made an installation called *"ABC…"* in New York, which can be regarded as the precursor to *New English Calligraphy* (Figure 22). *"ABC…"* comprises thirty-eight ceramic blocks that represent a sort of transliteration from the twenty-six letters of the Roman alphabet to Chinese characters. Each block bears a Chinese character whose pronunciation is equivalent to that of one letter of the Roman alphabet. A Chinese character is carved on the upper face of the block in the form of a printer's stamp and the Roman letter is printed on the side of the block. For example, the English letter A is rendered by the Chinese 'Ai', which means sadness. B is rendered 'b,' which means land on the other side. Some letters need two or three Chinese characters to transliterate. For example, W is rendered 'da', 'bu' and 'liu' that means big, cloth, and six, respectively. As a new writing system of English, *"ABC…"* is so awkward that nobody would like to use it to write English.

In either *New English Calligraphy* or *"ABC…,"* we can find that Xu Bing coequally treats Chinese and English. The purpose of the artist is not only to defend his cultural identity but also to mix different cultures. The mixture or fusion of different cultures is an inevitable phenomenon in this era of globalization. Xu Bing is very sensitive to this phenomenon and the possible problems arising from it.

4

Book from the Sky cannot be read by anyone, including the artist himself. Recently, Xu Bing has been working on a project that he calls *Book from the Earth* or *Book from the Ground* (Figure 23). The tool is also language. But, as the title suggested, this language is opposed to that of *Book from the Sky*, which consists of icons and can be understood by anybody, irrespective of their cultural or educational background. Actually, *Book from the Earth* is a computer program that can translate Chinese and English and, eventually, any languages into a language of icons. When a user types in an English or a Chinese sentence and presses return, it is translated into a language of icons that appears in the window. As Xu Bing says, "The program is meant

to enable communication regardless of the user's cultural background or level of education."[6]

In this era of globalization, cultural and linguistic miscommunication is unavoidable. Xu Bing teaches at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, works in his studio in New York, and travels internationally. He has had his own embarrassing experience of cultural and linguistic miscommunication. Even though Xu Bing has lived in New York for twenty years, his English is still limited because he didn't move to America until he was 35, which is not a good age to learn a new language. The desire for communication is the motivation for Xu Bing to create a new universal language that anybody can easily understand. In the beginning, Xu Bing got inspiration from airline safety cards. Since Xu Bing often travels internationally, he has spent a lot of time in airports and on airplanes. The easiest thing to read is an airline safety card; it uses the least amount of words and icons to explain important and complex situations. We should have or already have a new language for the people in airports and on airplanes. "Airports are the epitome of the 'global village'." Xu Bing says, "People from many countries, speaking many languages cross paths at the airport with great frequency and in great numbers and so only a language of icons works in this situation."[7] The second thing that inspired Xu Bing is chewing gum packages. Xu Bing recalls, "In 2003, I saw icons on a pack of gum that explained how to throw it away when you were done chewing. I realized that if icons can be used to tell a short story, then they should also be able to express a longer, more complex one."[8] Since that time, Xu Bing has been collecting symbols and icons. *Book from the Earth* just uses collected symbols and icons, and so it is easily understood by anyone.

From Xu Bing's perspective, not only airports need the language of icons but also our global village needs it. In other words, the world is becoming an airport, and the corresponding language should be icon languages. As Xu Bing says,

> Traditional languages grew out of small villages. And now the internet has shrunk the world down to a small village. Today's villagers use many different systems of marks and sounds to communicate, but still have to work and live on the same platform, the world is becoming more and

[6] "Interview from the MoMa Exhibition," New York: Canegie Hall, May 23, 2007.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

> more flat. The languages we use are almost the same as the ones we used a thousand years ago, but our way of life has changed completely. Traditional languages are not adapted to today's world. So it is only today that the Tower of Babel can be realized.[9]

According to Xu Bing, the world is becoming a global village, where "the convergence of lifestyles, commercial standardization, the globalization of advertising strategies, the increasing convenience of copying and managing images and especially the resistance of a new generation to traditional language forms have all led to the emergence of a language of icons, abbreviations and symbols. The continuation of this trend is humanity's future."[10] The significance of Xu Bing's *Book from the Earth* "doesn't lie in its resemblance to art, but in its ability to present a new perspective."[11] This new perspective is really an international perspective without any cultural and social barriers.

5

From *Book from the Sky* to *New English Calligraphy* to *Book from the Earth*, we can see the development of Xu Bing's art. The perspective of *Book from the Sky* is pure Chinese, the perspective of *New English Calligraphy* is the mix of Chinese and English, and the perspective of *Book from the Sky* is totally international or universal. I call the art with this international or universal perspective the new International Style. In the Chinese contemporary art world, we can find more and more art works that have this new International Style, not only in conceptual art, but also in abstract painting and photo realist painting. As Curtis Carter observes:

> The practice of art in a global context has become a matter of enabling individual artists to create, using the ideas and visual forms irrespective of their particular cultural origin. This means that the artist has available an evolving universal vocabulary of artistic means contributed over time from the practices of artists working in many cultures throughout the world. Creating art today requires considering exactly such a universal visual language. The outcome does not lie in creating a new "International Style" reminiscent of the Euro-centered International Style grounded in formalism and proposed as the norm for western architecture of the

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Kevin Kwang ed., "Character Building," *South China Sunday Morning Post*, November 12, 2006.

> modernist era. Rather, the situation invites artists to continue to develop new ideas for art incorporating their cultural histories and that of others.[12]

What Carter talks about is Chinese abstract painting. From my perspective, the best sample for this new International Style in Chinese contemporary art is Xu Bing's art, especially *Book from the Earth*. In other words, Xu Bing's development is the epitome of the change from an art that incorporates cultural symbols to one that is in the new International Style in Chinese contemporary art.

[12] Curtis Carter, "Art without Cultural Borders: Reflections on Qin Feng's Art," in the exhibition catalogue of *Qin Feng: To Badashanren*, Beijing: Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008, p. 84.

CALLIGRAPHIC EXPRESSION AND CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART: XU BING'S PIONEER EXPERIMENT

Liu Yuedi

Calligraphy, widely celebrated as the soul of Chinese art, has historically expanded the cultural space in China, with Chinese, as Arabic does in Central Asia, becoming a most significant representative of the calligraphic language. Some aestheticians take a non-historical stance to assume that the linear expressionism of calligraphy is a distinctive characteristic of Chinese art. This acclaim is pertinent to two issues: one is the nature of Chinese calligraphy, wherein aesthetic theories will be taken into account to address such questions as 'How does writing become art?' or 'How does handwriting become an action of art?' The other issue is the creative efforts on the part of artists to bring neo-Chineseness to life, wherein the practical implications of their efforts point to a disintegrative transformation of calligraphy into elements of contemporary art or a renewal of the old.

In a postmodern context, the reflection upon and interpretation of an art tradition would become futile without an equal or parallel concern with the practice of an art that aims at innovation. For that matter, the western mirror image of calligraphy will be suspended in the re-examination of what calligraphy is by way of a negative definition of what calligraphy is not, i.e. neither drawing nor practical art nor performing art nor pure art. The changes in the artistic creation of a contemporary Chinese artist, Xu Bing, will be applied to explain how Chinese characters-based calligraphy is translated into a calligraphic expression in modern art. Besides, the advantages or their opposite will be evaluated within the framework of Chinese aesthetics.

I. *New Interpretation of What Calligraphy Is: A Non-Western Perspective*

1.1 *Calligraphy is Not Drawing: between* tuxing *(representation of forms) and* tushi *(representation of ideas)*

In western aesthetics, it has long been held that calligraphy is far from being a fine art. Nelson Goodman, an American analytic philosopher,

once set down the syntactic density-syntactic articulateness as the primary standard to distinguish a non-aesthetic symptom from an aesthetic symptom (*Languages of Art*, 1968). Accordingly, "syntactic density is characteristic of nonlinguistic systems, and is one feature distinguishing sketches from scores and scripts."[1] With linguistic systems being discriminated from nonlinguistic systems, characters are likewise insulated from pictorial, gestural, and diagrammatic systems. If calligraphy is subjected to the static analysis of its characters found in Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*, it loses what is most important about it. Calligraphy focuses on the process of writing, and Goodman neglects the role of the artist's actions in the creation of art. Because he does not pay attention to the dynamic processes of the creation and reception of art, his analysis of the languages of art suffers.

In mainline Chinese aesthetics, calligraphy and drawing are said to be of the same origin, just as Roland Barthes once suggested that painting might well originate from writing or the tracing of signs. Being essentially the same, calligraphy and drawing are not only inseparable but are also subject to the same craftsmanship. Unlike the Europeans, who distinguish word from image as two distinct kinds of entities, the Chinese have defined calligraphy and drawing as similar on the assumption that they have the same origin or have common diagrammatical principles. In the light of this view, however, Zhang Yanyuan, an art historian in the 9th century, pointed out in his book *Li Dai Ming Hua Ji* (*Notes on Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties*) that "calligraphy and drawing should not be confused, for each of them follows a distinctive route,"[2] quoting Yan Zhitui (531-590), a learned scholar in Northern Qi Dynasty, who claimed that "pictures carry three kinds of meanings, one is tuli or representation of principles, i.e. guaxiang (hexagrams of Book of Changes), the second is tushi or representation of ideas, i.e., graphology, and the third is tuxing or representation of forms, i.e., painting".[3] For Wen Fong, the three meanings are three graphic systems of communicating ideas, with painting being a visual

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[1] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1968, p. 252.

[2] Zhang Yanyuan, *Notes on Famous Paintings of the Past Dynasties*, in *A Complete Collection of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting*, Vol. 1, Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy & Painting Publication House, 1993, p. 127.

[3] Zhang Yanyuan, *Notes on Famous Paintings of the Past Dynasties*, in *A Complete Collection of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting*, Vol. 1, Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy & Painting Publication House, 1993, p. 120.

language, characters a written language, and the magical hexagrams of Book of Changes signal or symbolical diagrams.

In Wen Fong's interpretation, which is notably from a western perspective, there is room for the distinction between alphabetic characters and painting (i.e. the difference between a visual language and a written language). But hieroglyphics, such as the Chinese square word, with the above three elements invariably designated as *tu* (picture) in Chinese, cannot be rigidly demarcated from paintings. Every Chinese character is apparently a pictorial representation and in calligraphic rendering is not only a pictorial symbol but also an art form, even though modern linguistics proves that according to *liushu* (the six main modeling principles of Chinese character), the number of Chinese characters that are purely hieroglyphic does not exceed several hundred. In addition, just as *tuli* (hexagram) is an intermediate between *tushi* (representation of ideas or graphology) and *tuxing* (representation of forms or painting), so some Chinese characters and their calligraphic representations are significantly symbolic.

In Wen Fong's obvious over-interpretation, there appears an uneasy rigidity between the pictorial, the diagrammatical, and the formal. From an archaeological perspective, however, instead of any of the above three, it is primitive symbols that can be justified as the sources of the ancient Chinese characters. In the process of gradual evolution, the characteristics of *tushi* (graphology) were reserved, while the symbolic attributes of *tuli* (hexagram), an intermediate, were mostly lost. Writing enjoys a prestigious status in traditional Chinese culture and is more stable and lasting in comparison with speech. After thousands of years, Chinese characters are still alive and apprehensible, even for contemporary Chinese, in comparison with the volatile Indo-European languages. "Writing in China, never reached a phonetic analysis of language … and that is why the graphic sign, symbol of a reality singular and unique like itself, has retained much of its primitive prestige."[4] In a sense, it is thanks to such precedence of writing that calligraphy plays an important role in traditional Chinese culture.

Chinese calligraphy is essentially a unity of *tushi* and *tuxing*. It is evident that, from the Chinese word for calligraphy, *shufa*, a combination of *shu* (writing) and *fa* (rule), writing is meaningless in the absence

[4] Gernet, "La Chine, Aspects et functions psychologiques de l'écritures", in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri C. Spivak, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 91.

of *tushi* while the rule makes no sense without *tuxing*. The rules of calligraphy are perceived through *tuxing*, while calligraphy itself is simultaneously *tushi* and *tuxing*. In fact, both are the essential attributes of calligraphy, with a range of metamorphoses from the most rigorous to the most bizarre and fanciful.

The tension between *tushi* and *tuxing* has also been the ground for an interesting debate in the aesthetics of calligraphy: in the case of cursive writing, especially the wild cursive style (such as Huai Su's *Zi Xu Tie*), do we need to recognize the characters and read the contents in order to appreciate its art or can we just enjoy its formal beauty without literal apprehension? In most cases, we have both at once, our understanding of *tushi* being integrated with our appreciation of *tuxing*. Of course, in rare circumstances the exclusive artistic enjoyment occurs with *tuxing*. To put it in another way, *tuxing* is what is required in appreciating calligraphy and in a given situation becomes more critical than *tushi*, which does not imply that the illegible characters negate *tushi* of a piece of calligraphy. If we look the other way around, however, calligraphy is distinguishable from painting in that it is basically *tushi*, the attribute of which serves to distinguish calligraphy from the abstract painting in a discernable oriental style. That Chinese calligraphy is capable of being interpreted in the same way as can a western abstract painting is a sheer misconception. As a matter of fact, Chinese calligraphy is rather a unique phenomenon.

1.2 *Calligraphy is Not Applied Art: Handwriting or Graving?*

Chinese calligraphy has its counterpart in the sphere of applied art, *meishuzi*, whose English translation as 'artistic calligraphy' has unwittingly added to its quasi character as a style that has a higher aesthetic value than calligraphy. Rather than being a highly styled form, *meishuzi* is historically the typeface family invented by private typographers between the Yuan and Ming dynasties, who borrowed calligraphic techniques for the printing industry in order to produce attractive publications. Though *meishuzi*, neat, impressible, and legible, used to be considered a stereotyped calligraphy that allows for imitation and copy, it is precluded from the calligraphy category for its uniform configuration of strokes and absence of individualistic elements. What distinguishes calligraphy from applied art? One of the distinctive qualities is that calligraphy is a reproduction of handwriting, while *meishuzi* was originally a byproduct of engraving. Although *meishuzi*

could also be reproduced by hand, its 'graving model' derives from the principles of engraving.

Because the focus of painting or calligraphy is placed upon traces of the brush, a common misinterpretation does exist: Chinese calligraphy as the art of lines. With this popular misinterpretation, it has been concluded that calligraphy is "the soul of various Chinese expressionistic arts" and "the representation of the cultural-psychological structure of the Chinese people"[5] Take for example Roger Fry, the formalist aesthetician, who comments on Chinese classical art that the first thing "that strikes one is the immense part played in Chinese art by linear rhythm", and the second thing, that this "rhythm is almost always of a flowing, continuous character."[6] According to Roger Fry, Chinese art has achieved the highest level since the most ancient times, using "the linear rhythm as the main method of expression".[7] This method is natural for Chinese painting, because Chinese painters rely on using water ink, and painting has always been considered a part of calligraphy. "A painting was always conceived as the visible record of a rhythm gesture. It was the graph of a dance executed by the hand"[8]. However, as an art of the ideogram, calligraphy is not identical to painting or linear art or abstract symbols. Another key factor is the bodily movements hidden behind the linear rhythms that the movements create, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

1.3 *Calligraphy is Not Performing Art: Moving Process as Deictic Marks*

In traditional art theory, to produce or to create an 'artwork' is crucial in that it is the logical end of a complete artistic activity. With bodily movement, the inner experiences of an artist become materialized in the artwork through a series of specific actions. This is an irreversible process of artistic creation from body to action and finally to artwork. As an ultimate externalization of the inner experiences, the artwork is regarded as the most important end. However, the process of the art-

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[5] Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1981, p. 43.

[6] Roger Fry, "The Significance of Chinese Art ", in Roger Fry, Laurence Binyon, Osvald Sirén, Bernard Rackham, A. F. Kendrick, W. W. Winkworth; B. T. Batsford, *Chinese Art: An Introductory Handbook to Painting, Sculpture, Ceramics, Textiles, Bronzes & Minor Art*, London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1935, p. 2.

[7] Roger Fry, "The Significance of Chinese Art ", p. 3.

[8] Roger Fry, "The Significance of Chinese Art ", p. 3.

ist's actions stands out in contemporary avant-garde art, be it the art of happenings, body art, or performing art, thus forming a circle of "body-happening-environment-action."[9]

The importance of the creative process was highlighted as early as Chinese classical culture, particularly in calligraphic production. In calligraphy and painting, in the process from bamboo in the hand to bamboo under a brushstroke, the artist must be left in an unrestrained state of great ease. When writing a small character, the artist moves his wrist, while to write a big character, he moves the elbow, "lifting his elbow, with *qi* of the whole body going from shoulder through arm and wrist to the fingers. When *qi* finally reaches the tip of the brush, the power of the whole body penetrates through the surface of the paper to the back."[10] Meanwhile, the bamboo in the mind has been reproduced in the bamboo in the hand with the strokes of the brush swaying to the free flow of the mind. This is not only an externalization, but also a psychosomatic merge. "Calligraphy begins with the mastery of the brushstroke. To write is to hold a brush and command its moves, according to its own rules ... It is the hand to take the brush to finish the writing; it is the mind to exceed from writing correctly to writing freely within the rules. Writing the original characters, use your eyes; comment on the writing, use your mouth. Mind goes first, hand second, and eyes and mouth last."[11] Furthermore, calligraphy is a pan-art process, which not only focuses on the finished work, but also the process of writing. Of course, the highest value of *miao shu* (wonderful writing) lies in the rhythm of life being presented.

In Chinese calligraphic theory, the brushstroke is often compared to the movement and dynamics of natural objects. The dot is like a stone falling from mountain, the horizontal stroke is like an array of cloud of a thousand miles, and the vertical stroke is like ten-thousand-year-old creeper. Rudolf Arnheim also found the traces of writing to be analogous to the motion of natural objects:

> Often the strong visual movement observed in natural objects derives from the fact that their shapes are the traces of physical forces, which have created them through motion, expansion, contraction, or the pro-

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[9] Liu Yuedi, *After the End of Art: An Aesthetic Rethinking of Art's Duration*, Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House, 2006, p. 286.

[10] Pan Tianshou, *Select Works on Art of Pan Tianshou*, Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1986, p. 19.

[11] Ji Fukun ed., *A Summary of Theories of Chinese Calligraphy*, Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000, pp. 215-216.

> cesses of growth … With similar directness we sense the motions of the hand in the traces of the pen on paper in writing. Here the standardized shapes of letters are re-created by motor activity … In this way the graphologist indirectly gauges the strength of temperament and vital impulses in their relation to the controlling will, which tends to guide activity in accordance with the prescribed task … Calligraphy is a live diagram of psychophysical forces.[12]

However, the Gestalt analysis is based on the phonetic alphabet system, which does not stand as a counterpart of the Chinese characters. In Norman Bryson's view, western painting is "the disavowal of deictic reference", while "Chinese painting is the confirmation of 'deictic marks'."[13] Most traditional oil paintings allow repeated overlaying with new paint so that oil has become an erasable medium; watercolor painting is among the few exceptions. If oil is a medium that can be erased or modified, then it cannot be a faithful record of the artist's brush stroke or a true expression of his spirit, that is, the works marks or strokes are not deictic. They do not refer to the extra-linguistic context in which they were made. Bryson's description of Chinese painting is correct thanks to his recognition of the utmost importance of the 'painting time', the focus on the temporal process that calligraphy shares with painting. However, Bryson did over interpret when he compared calligraphy to a performing art. In contrast with Chinese classical painting, calligraphy as deictic marks (marks whose meaning refers to the extra-linguistic context in which they are used) is temporally irreversible and spatially non-repeatable. It means that, on the one hand, calligraphy is temporally flowing, (no wonder Howard Gardner said that calligraphy is the Chinese version of Richard Wagner's music). But, on the other hand, once the writing process is at its end, the artwork cannot be modified—not even repeated strokes are allowed—otherwise the lines would become dead ones.

1.4 *Calligraphy is Not Fine Art: from Living Art to the Art World*

Interestingly, calligraphy has been regarded as art since the birth of modern Chinese culture. This is undoubtedly a historical consequence of the art institution. As we know, *yishu* as the Chinese translation of

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[12] Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964, p. 351.

[13] Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting*: *The Logic of Gaze*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 88.

kunst or art is a foreign notion widely imported to east Asian culture. And calligraphy is gradually incorporated into the art system, identified as a unique form of art. Nowadays in China there is not only a large official organization, Chinese Calligraphers Association, subordinate to China Federation of Literary and Art and its local branches, but also there are many calligraphy artists who are active in official and non-official domains. There is no doubt that calligraphy has become an important dimension in modern and contemporary Chinese art, and the group of calligraphy artists has also become an important presence among artists. This is precisely due to the calligraphic art world that has long been in place in the history of China.

In traditional aesthetic theory, the commentary by Yang Xiong (53 BC-18 BC) of Western Han Dynasty is the most succinct: calligraphy is images of the mind. (*Fa Yan*). Later, even painting was accepted as images of the mind. This view reflects the mainstream of classical Chinese aesthetics. Wang Sengqian (426-485) of the Northern Qi dynasties held that: "the wonder of the calligraphy lies firstly in the spirit and secondly in the form."[14] (*Bi Yi Zan*); Zhang Huaijin (mid-8th century) of the Tang dynasty said: "Those who truly appreciate calligraphy seek the spirit but ignore the form of characters."[15] Chen Yaotian (1725-1814) of the Qing dynasty said that: "The way of calligraphy lies in the imaginary movements. To be natural, the calligraphy must be imaginary."[16] (*Shu Shi*) Bao Shicheng (1775-1855) of the Qing dynasty said: "The wonder of calligraphy lies in the disposition, while power lies in the form. However, the disposition cannot be described, while the visual form is apprehensible."[17] *(Yi Zhou Guang Ji*) For these classicists, calligraphy is not only the voice of the mind, but also a living *Dao*. The wonder of *Dao* is hidden behind the disposition, and the disposition comes from the mind. In a calligraphic or painterly expression of the images of mind, the most important is not the representation of the form but of the spirit. The form relates to skill, but the

[14] Wang Sengqian, "*Bi Yi Zan*", in *Select Writings on Calligraphy of the Past Dynasties*, Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy & Painting Publication House, 1979, p. 62.

[15] Zhang Huaijin, "*On Characters*", in *Select Writings on Calligraphy of the Past Dynasties*, Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy & Painting Publication House, 1979, p. 209.

[16] Chen Yaotian, "*Shu Shi*", in Deng Shi ed., *Art Series*, Vol.6, No.1, Shanghai: Shenguang Publishing House, 1936.

[17] Bao Shicheng, "*Yi Zhou Guang Ji*", in *Select Writings on Calligraphy of the Past Dynasties*, Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy & Painting Publication House, 1979, p. 667.

spirit is aesthetic. As long as the spirit is grasped, the form of characters could become invisible.

These expressionistic criticisms of calligraphy are both an inside out definition of calligraphy and a top to bottom definition of art. In contrast, the current definition of art starts from the bottom by determining the demarcation line between art and non-art. However from a historical perspective, we will find that in pre-modern society calligraphers were not professional artists, and their role as calligrapher was eclipsed by their more predominant identity as traditional literati. Although stele inscription became popular in the later Han Dynasty (*Wen Xin Diao Long*), which gave rise to the demand for calligraphy and the growing number of professional calligraphers, calligraphy failed to be separated from other occupations.

In the history of classical Chinese calligraphy almost all the masters are literati, and some of them are even senior court officials such as the loyal Yen Zhenqing and the treacherous Qin Hui. This phenomenon naturally encourages the appeal to the identification of calligraphic attainment with personal morality, obviously a result that the Confucian culture entails. The famous Four Masters of the Song Dynasty originally included Su Shi (1037-1101), Huang Tingjian (1045-1105), Mi Fu (1051-1107), and Cai Jing (1047-1126), but later Cai Xiang (1012-106) took the place of Cai Jing, whose treachery cost him prestige as a preeminent calligrapher. Before the division of labor in modern society, calligraphy was never an independent occupation separable from daily life. It is the same with the destiny of the calligraphers, who were not independent and designated *shuajia* in classical Chinese culture. Neither was calligraphy an autonomous art.

More importantly, calligraphy was a basic skill for every member of the literati in ancient society, but now it has become a matter of refined taste since the brush was replaced by pen and pen by computer. In history, many calligraphic masterpieces were produced on real social occasions, such as correspondence letters (*Kui Xue Shi Qing Tie* by Wang Xizhi), informal notes (*Ya Tou Wan Tie* by Wang Xianzhi), and dirge (*Ji Zhi Wen Gao* by Yan Zhenxing), when genuine feelings poured out in a spontaneous way. Moreover, from the point of view of the new art history, it has been discovered that since the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, in additions to letters, manuscripts, and daily writings, the number of handwritings intended for other social occasions is much higher than those produced in the art studio for the purpose of artistic appreciation. The famous calligra-

pher Fu Shan (1607-1644) is a most typical example. It is obvious that calligraphy is an ordinary skill practiced in daily life rather than an independent and autonomous art. Further, calligraphy has remained a pan-art, never separating itself from real life. In other words, calligraphy is an art of life, neither beyond nor outside life.

The above reinterpretation of calligraphy's basic characteristics refers separately to four questions: (1) Whether calligraphy is *painting* relates to the question of how Chinese characters become art; (2) Whether calligraphy is *applied art* relates to the question of whether the basic features of calligraphy can be attributed to handwriting; (3) Whether calligraphy is *artwork* points to the creative process of calligraphy; (4) Whether calligraphy is *pure art* addresses the question of how traditional calligraphy is deeply rooted in life.

II. *The Changes in Xu Bing's Artistic Creation: Creative Transformation of Calligraphy*

2.1 Book from the Sky (figure 2)*: the Imitative Power of the 'Quasi-*Song *Typeface'*

For contemporary successful artists, calligraphy has not been practiced as it was in its traditional context; instead, it has been transformed into modern 'calligraphic-ness.' Xu Bing is prominent among them. His masterpiece *Xi Shi Jian—Shi Ji Mo Juan* (also nicknamed *Book from the Sky*), which took him four years (1987-1991) to finish, is a metamorphosis of the *Song* type and his earliest effort at artistic creation with the medium of characters.

What characters compose *Book from the Sky*? In Xu Bing's own interpretation, the characters, devoid of any denotation or significance, are simply his own invention. In spite of the initial impression that these characters are variants of the official and standard typefaces, they will emerge under scrutiny as fabrications by means of the radicals and strokes of Chinese characters. Imitation of Chinese characters as they may be designated, they are closer in structure to the Tangut Script, which Tangut tribe once created and used for a short term. Though the characters of *Book from the Sky* resemble the Tangut Script in plastic rules, they have been deprived of any of the substantial meaning a character is charged with. Consequently, the characters of *Book from the Sky* are content-free forms, i.e., characters that instantly

lose their vigor at birth. Thus, the quasi-*Song* typeface characters of *Book from the Sky* constitute an indecipherable book from the heaven.

The reason why Xu Bing chose to apply the quasi-*Song* typeface is that it has neither style nor individuality. Therefore, Xu Bing's invention has a counter-calligraphy tendency. Xu Bing engraved over four thousand printing plates and had them reduplicated in large scale so as to produce an imposing artwork. And the *Book from the Sky* does shock its audience with its offbeat effect. What is more important is that these newly assembled characters have brought forth a positive effect of inter-culturality. Xu Bing recalled that western people assert that these characters are genuine Chinese, the Chinese suspect that they are ancient hieroglyphs, the Japanese mistake them for Korean characters, while the Koreans take for granted they are Japanese. People from different cultures interpret the *Book from the Sky* in distinct ways, with no knowledge of its implications. Since *meishuzi* is traditionally not regarded as fine art, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* seems to draw on the transformed *meishuzi* with a purpose to challenge the established rules of Chinese calligraphy.

2.2 Square Word Calligraphy (Figure 21)*: Mutual Decoding and Misreading between Chinese and English*

Square Word Calligraphy by Xu Bing is the best example that illustrates the intermediate position of calligraphy between *tuxing* (of forms) and *tushi* (of ideas). The newly invented characters, pictorial representations (*tuxing*) as they appear, are in fact ideographs (*tushi*) of a given sort, drawing on the tension between Chinese and English. On the one hand, their images resemble those of Chinese, though they are not. Wearing the mask of Chinese *tuxing*, they lack the essential ideographic function (*tushi*) of a Chinese character. On the other hand, they are English but do not resemble English. Despite the absence of English *tuxing*, they have the *tushi* of English in place.

As the first successful artwork by Xu Bing, *Square Word Calligraphy*, which started in late 1993, was finished in 1994. Since his arrival in the USA in 1990, Xu Bing had had some unsuccessful attempts at transformations between Chinese and English. Among them, *ABC* (Figure 22) is an important piece during his earlier years in USA. The earthenware Chinese type is used to serve as phonetic notations of English. As is known, phonemic transcription is an international standard of phonetic notation; therefore, that Chinese characters are used as phonetic

symbols is a unique phenomenon in China, for example, '也司' for 'Yes' and '黑漆板凳' for 'husband'. Thus, chinglish come into being as a transformed mixture of English and Chinese.

On the one hand, Xu Bing used a single Chinese character as phonetic notation of a single English letter, for example, '哀' for A, '彼' for B, and, on the other hand, he also used several Chinese characters for a single English letter, such as '癌克思' for X (which carries a metaphoric import because '癌克思' looks like '马克思' i.e. 'mark' in Chinese). The bilingual table of the 26 English letters that Xu Bing produced in the same way is a simplified contrast between Chinese and English. After all, in the face of cultural shock, Xu Bing as a new immigrant to US addressed the language problem by way of differing pronunciations. He tried to find in art a phonetic bridge to connect Chinese and English, with Chinese simply taken as an inferior instrument to reach English. This attempt at mutual communication proved to be superficial, without touching upon the cultural distinctions each language represents. However, after Xu Bing attempted the deconstruction and reconstruction of Chinese characters in his *Book from the Sky*, he has turned to walking on a wire tightrope between English and Chinese as two distinct languages and cultures.

It was then that Xu Bing made his breakthrough and produced the series of *Square Word Calligraphy*. In the exhibition of *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* sponsored by the Asia Society in New York in 2007, Xu Bing admitted for the first time that he had thought English was an international language and that his initial attempt at artistic experiments with English letters as the medium had failed. In contrast, his *Square Word Calligraphy* made a hit. Why?

What Xu Bing had in his mind is the fundamental relationship between thought, language, and character, with his skeptical reflection directed at language. What are represented in Xu Bing's art works are characters, transformed characters in particular. In his own opinion, characters are the basic elements of human cultural concepts, and the transformation of characters is the transformation of the most essential part of human thoughts.

Square Word Calligraphy, originally called *New English Calligraphy*, is commonly known as *English Square Characters* because the pseudo Chinese characters are in fact words composed of English letters, i.e. square English words. In *ABC*, Chinese characters serve as the tool of phonetic notation of English letters, while in *Square Word Calligraphy*, English letters reshaped as Chinese characters serve as radicals and

strokes to be assembled into a square word. In *ABC*, a single or several Chinese characters are used to signify the pronunciation of an English letter, while in *Square Word Calligraphy*, one square word acquires much more signifying space, with its letters spatially rearranged in four directions as the Chinese characters.

Why did Xu Bing claim that the new characters are calligraphy? First, these new characters can be written out, and Xu Bing had once demonstrated how to write them down with Chinese brushes. Thanks to Xu Bing's ingenuity, the square English words could be written down in a calligraphic way. Though there are scriptural rules for these new characters, the new square words should not be considered as heterogeneous isomorphs of traditional Chinese calligraphy. Interestingly enough, though Chinese people should be able to easily identify radicals and strokes, the square words are not Chinese at all, whereas the English-speaking people will finally apprehend the square words, although at first sight they have difficulty in adapting themselves to the rearrangement of the letters. Such duplicity is the charm of Xu Bing's art works. On the one hand, misreading occurs among both the Chinese people and foreigners. Foreigners easily assume that the new characters are Chinese, while the Chinese people fail to read them, because they are found out to be English. On the other hand, cross-reading occurs between the Chinese people and foreigners. Chinese people recognize the strokes, without knowing their meaning, while foreigners understand each square word, with difficulty in recognizing their morphemic elements.

Xu Bing has continued to develop his invention of English square words in two directions: New Tech and Political Culture. With the former, Xu Bing designed a software program for the English square words. The representative work is *Your Surname, Please* (1998). Anyone who types in his surname in English, on the condition that there is a match in the database for the surname, newly arranged letters of his surname will pop up, together with optional variants of different typefaces to choose. With the latter, the new characters have been used to copy slogans popular during the Cultural Revolution, as well as classical poems, couplets, and ballads. Xu Bing wrote down in new characters "Art Serves the People," an epitome of Chairman Mao's thoughts about the role of art, and had them posted everywhere. *New English Calligraphy: Quotations from Chairman Mao* (2003) is a longer excerpt from "The Speech at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art" by Mao Tsetung in 1942. Xu Bing particularly picked up Mao

Tsetung's comments on the issue of popularization: "What is popularization? It means that our writers and artists should identify themselves with the workers, peasants and soldiers. To achieve this emotional fusion, they should learn the language of the masses. How can anyone talk of literary and artistic creation if he does not understand the language of the masses?"[18] Likewise, on the one hand, Xu Bing has directed his attention to the popularization of art, i.e. art spoken in the very language of the masses. On the other hand, he has attempted a lingual and conceptual representation of art in order to realize the grand social sculpture Joseph Beuys proposed.

2.3 Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*: Viewers' Participation in Calligraphic Exercise*

In the *Square Word Calligraphy* series, *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, a by-product that started in 1994 in order to foster interaction, has been singled out from the whole series since the artwork has invited new questions to be addressed: one involves the participation by the viewers of calligraphy that is related to the process of calligraphic creation, and the other involves the compilation of a textbook. Both questions concern the initial steps in language learning.

Xu Bing had much earlier intended to compile a dictionary for the newly created square words of English, with a more ambitious plan in his mind to promote a broad application of the new characters as in printing periodicals or newspapers. However, since language is simply a habitual way of speech, the promotion of the new characters has to rely on political powers. Despite the utopian tone, Xu Bing did compile a textbook of the English square words. In traditional calligraphic training, imitation (*lin mo*) of masterpieces of stele inscription is an inevitable step. "*Lin* focuses on observation and imitation, while *mo* means following each radical and stroke on the copy of the original script. Through *Lin*, the spirit of the original script is captured, while through *mo*, the structure is determined."[19] Drawing on the traditional calligraphy textbooks, Xu Bing set down in the opening chapter of his own textbook the rules for sitting posture and brush-holding,

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[18] Mao Tse-tung, "Yan'an Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art", in *Mao Tse-tung, Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 3, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1953.

[19] Ji Fukun ed., *A Summary of Theories of Chinese Calligraphy*, Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000, p. 160.

along with other illustrations of rules for separate standard strokes (similar to *yong zi ba fa*, the writing principles of Chinese calligraphy, which take the eight strokes of the character *yong* as example), movement of the graphical brush, character formation, and so on. Calligraphic taboos are also mentioned, such as the effect of crane's knee and bee's waist. Compared with traditional textbooks, Xu Bing's book has become an absurd forgery, owing to its deformed cultural elements.

English Square Word is a great success in the west because it is not completely deprived of content and western people are able to appreciate calligraphy when English words are written down in a calligraphic way. Thus, the writing process plays an important role in *Square Work Calligraphy Classroom*, with the viewers participating in the creation to roam between the western and eastern cultures in the "second creation." First, in order for the audience to start their aesthetic enjoyment the moment they step into a calligraphy classroom, the desks, writing brushes, ink sticks, paper, ink-stones, textbooks, and copybooks have been carefully designed in order to contribute to a calligraphic context. Second, the viewers take part in the writing process, learning rules of writing and moving the brush, and more importantly, the method to read and *mo* the new characters. In the calligraphy classroom, the cultural shock that a foreigner experiences in learning how to write English square words is no less than that of a Chinese confronted with the new square characters of English fabricated by Xu Bing. Of course, the process a western viewer undergoes from observation of printed words to the imitation of calligraphy, and then to personal handwriting is just opposite to the historical formation of Chinese culture, which started with characters and then moved to the writing of them (calligraphy) and then to their romanization into pinyin.

2.4 The Living Word*: from Word Evolution to Model Evolution*

Since 2001, Xu Bing has made several attempts at the transformation between characters and images. *The Living Word* is an eye-catching suspended vertical chain, which contains 430 Chinese characters for 'bird', each in a different typeface, such as the hieroglyphic, seal script, clerical script, regular script and simplified character. With the most abstract character of a bird fastened to the ground end and the pictorial image of a bird flying out into the open air, the whole piece, composed

of the 430 characters, spirals up to the open space outside the ceiling. Between the two ends, we can see the evolution of Chinese characters in various forms, from the abstract symbol to the vivid picture of a bird. In addition, the gradual transformation from hieroglyph to image helps visitors rethink the relation between concept, meaning, character, and the plastic model. More importantly, the artist tries to direct our attention to the transformation of these elements.

2.5 Reading Landscape*: Writing Landscape Painting with Chinese Characters*

Xu Bing's *Reading Landscape* (2001), an echo of the traditional notion that writing and painting share the same root, is a technically innovative piece. In traditional painting, the employment of calligraphic techniques began to take place before the Yuan dynasty (founded by Kublai Khan, 1271-1368). Since then, the emphasis upon calligraphic strokes in painting separated calligraphic painting from pictorial painting. In other words, since the invasion of calligraphic language into painting, painterly expression gave way to literati's calligraphic painting, focus on painterly techniques gave way to overall refinement beyond painting, and social function to individuality. In contrast, Xu Bing goes so far as to translate landscape into characters, turning landscape painting into hieroglyphs. His innovation might be as simple as employing the characters of wood 木 in different shades of green and plastic models to represent the whole landscape or as complicated as *Reading Landscape: After Yuan Jiang*. This is a projection of the original two-dimensional painting by Yuan Jiang onto the background wall and the front ground, which are occupied by the hieroglyphs of the Chinese characters of mountain, rock, earth, and water (山,石,土,水). This re-configures a three-dimensional space, which sets the stage for a cross-transformation between picture and character, concrete landscape and abstract idea, and spaces of different dimensions.

Thus, Xu Bing's artistic creation has put into circulation the idea that Chinese characters derive from hieroglyphs. While people can both decipher hieroglyphic meanings and enjoy their artistic beauty, Xu Bing tries to produce landscape paintings for people to read and 'write'. He might have drawn on *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (the most famous learner's book in China), since he has always regarded this book as a vocabulary of painting, a dictionary that contains newly transformed radicals and strokes from paintings

for the purpose of rearrangement into calligraphic painting. Therefore, to paint mountain or water paintings is in fact to write them. It is said that his inspiration came from a trip to Nepal, where he resumed drawing sketches. He did not want to paint in the same way as before, so it occurred to him that he could make 'literal' drawings of the scenery. He recalled that when he sat on the mountain, looking around, he wrote down the character of mountain (山), just to find himself drawing the mountain. He was testing the relationship between cultural expressions and nature, only to conclude that the system of cultural expressions fails to catch up with changes in nature. In spite of the sense of dislocation and limitation he underwent at the moment of drawing, he also made sense of Chinese culture and mentality: calligraphy and painting share the same root. All the discussions about the styles of calligraphy or painting are as meaningless as a game of thought and analysis, but the first hand experience of drawing, immediate and primitive, produces a most powerful action in a most powerful style that defies any justification on the grounds of cultural reference, comparison, and conventions.

2.6 Background Story: *Returning Brushstroke and Ink to Materials*

Xu Bing has not only translated landscape painting into characters, but he has also attempted writing and painting with natural materials and reduced the traditional brushstroke and ink into raw materials. Take *Background Story* that Xu Bing made for the National Museum of East Asian Arts in Berlin. Dry sticks, cotton wadding, and other available materials were collected to create a collage of eastern-styled landscape painting, and the distance between its frosted glass and the collage was intended to produce the hazy beauty one easily associates with the effect of ink on rice paper. As Xu Bing himself said, "The interesting part is the probe into the essence of Chinese painting and Chinese art. Occasionally I am curious why it works with Chinese painting rather than oil painting. It should be a hint of our painting and art, a clue to our perceptions of the relationship between the world, thought and nature."[20]

[20] Xu Bing, "My Art's Ways and Means", in *Decoration*, 2008 (4).

2.7 Book from the Ground (Figure 23): *the Ultimate Pursuit of the Same Character All Over the World*

Book from the Ground (2003) can be regarded as the terminal effort in his inquiry about language, as this piece most clearly expresses the artist's ultimate pursuit of the universal symbolic language. Obviously, the symbols in *Book from the Ground* are both *tuxing* and *tushi*, yet these symbols are signs and symbols, such as traffic signals, collected from daily life. When Susanne K. Langer tries every means to distinguish sign from signal, she actually replaces the term 'sign' with 'signal,' which then allows sign to function as a more general term and signal to be a type of sign. However, Xu Bing has removed the boundary between sign and signal as well as that between *tuxing* and *tushi*, with an attempt to create a new in-between piece of work.

From *Book from the Sky* to *Book from the Ground*, from the sky back to the ground, from the indecipherable to the legible, Xu Bing has shown his ambition to pull down the Tower of Babel. If *Book from the Sky* reveals the predicament that men can communicate with each other only in languages, *Book from the Ground* directly points to the target of the reunion of mankind through signs, which was impossible before the era of globalization. As early as when he created *Square Characters Calligraphy*, Xu Bing had hoped that the characters could be widely used, although he was then just working on the narrow subject of Chinese-English comparison. With *Book from the Ground*, he has taken universally accepted symbols as his goal. As Xu Bing said, despite human limitations, small but gradual changes in human thought will lead to the change of the whole world. When Xu Bing continues his worldwide collection of the signs and symbols in current use, he is actually in search of their common ground and philological attributes for an Esperanto and its grammar. However, when he is seeking the maximal universality, will his pursuit put an end to his eastern way of thinking? Will his pursuit end up in an ultimate language?

III. *'Calligraphic Expression' in Contemporary Chinese Art: Success and Failure*

3.1 *Grasp the Essence of the Chinese Calligraphy Spirit*

In general, the use of calligraphic characteristics in his artistic creation proves that Xu Bing has grasped the spirit of traditional Chinese calligraphy:

(1) The union of *tuxing* and *tushi* in calligraphy is a source of inspiration for Xu Bing, whose artistic creation is greatly influenced by the image-led thinking of Chinese people. He even claims that, thanks to the role of Chinese, Chinese people had already stepped into the so-called era of picture-reading thousands of years ago because their reading was affected by way of their perception of the image of Chinese characters. Xu Bing's exploration of the relationship between *tuxing* and *tushi* is reflected in his artworks. In *Book from the Sky*, *tuxing* (form) is present while *tushi* (meaning) is absent; in *Square Word Calligraphy*, *tuxing* of one language is mingled with *tushi* of another language; in *The Living Word*, *tushi* is gradually transformed to *tuxing* or vice versa in *Reading Landscape*. All these efforts give testimony to the imagination with which Xu Bing draws on the tension between *tushi* and *tuxing*. Also important is the relationship between calligraphy and *meishuzi*. If *meishuzi* is said to be the main role in *Book from the Sky*, the fabricated English square words seem to have taken on a unique form between *meishuzi* and calligraphy. It is not until the *Book from the Ground* series that Xu Bing finally turned to seek universal symbols, completely giving up their calligraphic expressions.

(2) Calligraphy, as an art of living, is another source of inspiration. Xu Bing denies that his works are art. In Xu Bing's eyes, art is just a basic form of living. He believes that Chairman Mao is a real, and the greatest, social sculptor even though it was Joseph Beuys that first proposed the notion of social sculpture. Xu Bing, often quoting Chairman Mao, maintains that life is the source for literature and art. One should face problems wherever they arise, and wherever there are problems, there emerges art. Xu Bing said in an interview that artists should work outside the art system because as an insider nobody can give or take. "What matters is the distance one should keep from the system" and "focus on art itself while forgetting the so-called artistic creation,

styles, schools, and materials."[21] Just as Xu Bing relates the progress of art to the development of the thinking ability and returns calligraphy to its role as an art of living, in a similar way he presents calligraphic expression as a new artistic language.

(3) An additional source of inspiration for Xu Bing's reflection upon art is the writing process of calligraphy. In the face of the static square words, the audience is encouraged not only to recognize writers' movements as they once did with the painting process in Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist drip paintings, but also to participate in calligraphic writing. With *Your Surname, Please*, the audience experienced differing interactions from the particular English square words that pop up after their surnames were typed in. With *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, visitors practiced the new calligraphy in the gallery classroom and took home free square words textbook packages that consisted of writing brush, ink, copybook, and practice sheet, all of which are intended to extend artistic creation into daily life.

3.2 *The loss: from the Viewpoint of 'Qi Yun,' 'Zen Enlightenment' and 'Thinking'*

From the perspective of classical Chinese aesthetics, part of the essence of traditional culture through which he has struggled to present calligraphic characteristics is missing in Xu Bing's works. In a sense, the loss is nowhere found but in success.

First, *qi*, as part of the calligraphic *qi yun*, is missing in Xu Bing's works of quasi-Chinese characters. Though *qi* is evident within a single English square word, the coherence and correspondence between the words and across the lines have become obscure, and each quasi-Chinese character in a different typeface is being presented as an independent form. In classic Chinese aesthetics, *qi* persists even after the writing is finished, i.e., the connection between sequent strokes rather than one unbroken lengthy stroke is upheld as the highest value. As Zhang Huaiguan commented in *Shu Duan* (*Calligraphy Review*), "The dynamics of the characters emerge at once. In case of minor broken strokes, the spirit still holds and permeates across the lines when the strokes get connected."[22] Regrettably, Xu Bing has placed too much

[21] Wang Yanjuan and Chen Wen, "Xu Bing: An Artist Playing with Words", in *Beijing Review*, 2008, No. 3.

[22] Zhang Huaiguan, "Treatises on Calligraphy", in *Select Writings on Calligraphy of the Past Dynasties*, Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy & Painting Publication House, 1979, p. 166.

emphasis on the structure and formal beauty within each single character at the cost of the dynamics of *qiyun* that retains the whole piece of work. Hopefully, *yun* (rhythm) of each character has been kept alive and overflowing. Therefore, even if *qi* of calligraphy is broken, *yun* of character has survived. It seems that Xu Bing cannot kill two birds with one stone.

Second, as far as Zen's *wu* (enlightenment) is concerned, Xu Bing has paid more attention to the philosophical effect of *dun wu* (sudden enlightenment), which is however more like brain-teasing when the audience suddenly realize that the characters in *Book from the Sky* are illegible, while the square words are legible. Nonetheless, in the wake of *wu*, the audience fails to identify themselves with the Chinese culture carried within the works. After all, Xu Bing has grasped the verbal paradox of Zen: though words are not pursued, meditation has to rely on words. Man is drawn to Zen but his access is rejected. It is the same with Xu Bing's art: appealing or familiar as they seem to be, the audience feels estranged in the face of the new characters he created. The characters Xu Bing created in his early years are illegible with the effect that the habitual way of thinking by means of language is cut off. In a sense, though a broader space for reflection has been opened up, Xu Bing's answer bears no significant cultural implications for the question that concerns Zen enlightenment in the wake of rejection.

Third, as far as the way of thinking is concerned, Xu Bing has not isolated himself from the influence of the pictorial Chinese characters, which is evident both in Chinese people's thinking and their aesthetic feeling. As for the poems written down in the English square words, Xu Bing's efforts at cross-cultural communication between China and the west are fairly successful. Since Chinese and English belong to two different writing systems, it is a highly ingenious breakthrough that the Chinese calligraphic characteristics are incorporated into English script. When the linear and diachronic English letters, words, and sentences are reorganized into Chinese-styled synchronous structures, when English can be represented calligraphically in the form of Chinese poems and couplets, when the viewers appreciate both the meaning and the new calligraphic style simultaneously, Xu Bing had indeed introduced Chinese elements into English ways of thinking in a subtle way, incorporating Chinese's picture-related ways of thinking into English. At the same time, it should be noted that, from *Book from the Sky* to *Book from the Ground*, Xu Bing has been searching for a

universal language just to have himself kept further from Chinese traditions. The calligraphic characteristics have become less perceivable in his works, so if Xu Bing finally comes up with an Esperanto, will contemporary Chinese art be expressed in Chinese?

I want to use one of Xu Bing's couplets written in square word calligraphy as a final conclusion. The motto-styled couplet can be taken as the methodology Xu Bing relies on in his new calligraphic creation: 'Make the past serve the present; make the foreign things serve China'. The English of the couplet has been restructured under the principle of New English. Is it not that Xu Bing's methodology can be reversed: 'Make Chinese things serve the foreign; make the present serve the past'.

THE POLITICAL BODY IN CHINESE ART

Curtis L. Carter

The uses of visual images based on calligraphy and the depiction of the human body in Chinese art have served an important role in the exercise of political power by leaders in Chinese culture. The two media that are most closely linked to the exercise of political power in Chinese culture are written or performed calligraphy and representational art featuring the human figure. The latter is more familiar in western nations where one often finds sculptures of political figures displayed in prominent public spaces. However, in China calligraphy as a form of written art serves as a principle symbolic expression of political power. This is true in both traditional Chinese culture and the twentieth century revolutionary period and beyond. The connection between figurative political images and political power needs little explanation for a western audience. But how is calligraphy connected to the theme of the political body in Chinese art and culture? One answer is offered in Mao Zedong's early writings, where he linked the practice of calligraphy to physical training of the body. Calligraphy as he understood it, "used the entire body to express the writer's spirit."[1]

After a brief introduction to a Chinese understanding of the body in traditional Chinese culture, I will examine the political uses first, of calligraphy, and then of figurative representation. Figurative representation had a limited role in Chinese traditional cultures, apart from rituals and in portraiture. Nevertheless, figurative representation assumed a prominent role in the art of twentieth century China. Perhaps this shift was in part a consequence of the influence of western cultures where figuration has an important role, both in popular culture and fine arts. The adoption of Socialist Realism, a popular style of art in communist Russia, no doubt was one of the contributing factors. Our discussion of the political body in Chinese art will conclude with a look at the works of two contemporary Chinese artists, Xu Bing and Ma Bao Zhong, whose contemporary art offers a different under-

[1] Richard Curt Kraus, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1991, *59.*

standing of the roles of calligraphy and visual representation with respect to political power.

I

In traditional Chinese culture, the body is seen primarily in the context of filial relations to family and, by extension, loyalty to the sovereign. The body is transmitted through the parents and enters into a set of relationships and obligations, first with family members. However, filial duties in Chinese culture extend beyond the immediate family in significant ways. This notion is expressed succinctly in the words of Li Chi, a third century BC disciple of Confucius: "If in serving the sovereign, he be not loyal, he is not filial. If in discharging the duties of office, he be not serious, he is not filial … If on the field of battle he be not brave, he is not filial."[2] The concept of hsiao (filial piety) thus constitutes the foundations of the traditional social and political systems in China. This concept of hsiao first developed when the Chinese were predominantly an agrarian society dependent on, and revering of, nature; it continues to influence the thinking and actions of Chinese people even today. Filial piety calls for a hierarchy of relationships with respect to family members and with respect to the sovereign. These relationships were built in part on the five virtues of Confucianism: jen (human heartedness), yi (righteousness), li (propriety, rituals, rules of proper conduct), chih (wisdom), and hsin (good faith).

II

To begin our consideration of the political role of calligraphy in politics, let us consider the actions of the Chinese statesman-poet Qu Yuan (343-278 BC). Qu Yuan attempted to institute reforms against corruption in the administration of the Chinese state of Chu by satirizing in his poems the "corruption, selfishness, and disregard for the people on the part of dubious characters who achieved trusted positions in the Imperial Court."[3] His actions resulted in banishment from the kingdom. When he felt unable to do anything to save his state, he

[2] Fung Yu-Lan, *Selected Philosophical Writings of Fung Yu- Lan* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1991), 636-648.

[3] Han Lin Scholar, "State of Chu, Warring States Period," Internet Post 7, 251, August 17, 2007.

ended his life by clasping a big stone and leaping into the Milo River in northeast Hunan province. However, his efforts were not lost on his countrymen who continue to honor him each year on the day on the lunar calendar marking his drowning. The celebration includes drag boat races in symbolic search of his body, and throwing into the water bundles of zongzi (glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo) to divert the fish from eating his body. Perhaps this celebration itself carries forth the artist's intent to institute social change by calling attention to the vices of those entrusted with power and the attending responsibilities for leadership. Qu Yuan's experience represents the ultimate fulfilment of one's filial obligations to self, family and state including the sacrifice of his own body. In this instance, the artist literally appropriates his actual physical body in the effort to influence political corruption. Thus Qu Yuan's effort to bring about reform, first as a poet writing calligraphy, and then through the symbolic use of his body to make a political statement represents the two modes of expressing political power under consideration here. Normally, except for actual military combat or situations involving bodily torture, the political use of the body involves figurative representation as in sculptures or pictures.

Prior to the twentieth century, the main form of images used for political purposes in China was calligraphic writing. Elegant calligraphic inscriptions typically serve this purpose in traditional Chinese culture. Calligraphy is based on characters consisting of marks that function as symbols in a language system. This practice was in contrast to the practice in the West, where representations of the human figure hold a predominant role in public representations of political power in the form of pictures and in monuments. Here, the figure in art is "cloaked in its own authority, and is inclined to be totalitarian; it does not have to reveal its intent or temperament."[4] In China, calligraphy was regarded as superior to figurative art because of its ability to reveal the intent and character of the person.

Thus, one of the reasons for the relative absence of figurative representations of the human body is the esteemed place calligraphy holds in Chinese culture and history as a symbol of political power. In his book, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics* and the *Chinese Art of*

[4] Chang Tsong-Zung, "The Character of the Figure," in *Word and Meaning: Six Contemporary Chinese Artists,* Exhibition Catalogue, University of Buffalo Art Gallery, 2000, 14, 15.

Calligraphy, Richard Kraus argues that calligraphy has served as a metaphor "for the elite culture of imperial China."[5] Within this tradition, public monuments typically feature calligraphy in the form of Chinese characters, instead of a figurative sculpture of a prominent political personage, as would normally be the case in the west.

Because of its identification with imperial China, calligraphy's place as an art form, as well as a symbol of political power, was perhaps viewed with ambivalence by some leaders in revolutionary twentieth century China. Nevertheless, contrary to the view that the Communist revolution had obliterated Chinese traditional culture where calligraphy held a place of honor and of practical usefulness in enforcing the political power of the leadership, Kraus holds that Communist revolutionaries regularly adapted calligraphy as a means of reinforcing their own the political power. Mao himself rejected the notion of art for art's sake arguing that all literature and art must serve both artistic standards and political ends. "There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake or art that stands above classes or art that is detached or independent of politics."[6] To offset any concerns over the elitist history of calligraphy, Mao proposed to treat calligraphy as a means of propaganda. This did not mean that aesthetics was to be neglected, only that the characters should be visually attractive ('clear, well shaped, and pleasing to read') and able to present a clear political message to its audience. In this case the audience would include workers and others comprising the mass population, instead of an elite literati. Fancy decorative characters intended mainly to exhibit the learning of the writer were deemed unsuitable for communicating to the masses a clear political message.

If Kraus's thesis is correct, it means that the education, public prestige, and power of an individual political leader was judged in part by his or her talent in producing calligraphic poems, moralistic inscriptions, and political slogans. This practice represents a cultural connection between the arts and politics in China that differs substantially from the relation of the arts and politics in the United States, where aesthetics rarely enters into the practical political domain.

The power of the written characters underlying their usefulness derives in part from an almost magical reverence for the written

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[5] Kraus, *Brushes with Power*, x.

[6] Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," May 1942, Section 111

Chinese characters used in calligraphy, which extended even to the use of ink as a remedy for physical and psychological ills, or to ward off evils.[7] In the political sphere, public figures (emperors of the past and modern party leaders such as Mao) were expected to demonstrate mastery with ink and brush. Indeed, Mao and other leaders are said to have used effectiveness in writing calligraphy as a measure of education. Mao himself frequently wrote inscriptions in characters aimed to encourage his followers to improve or to carry out the aims of the revolution.[8] Accordingly, a leader's ability to exercise political power depends on the ability to demonstrate excellence in calligraphy. The calligraphy of political power is thus not only aesthetic, but is a code to authority. Calligraphic inscriptions of powerful leaders were sought to add prestige and credibility to public spaces, events, and even books. For example, in 1986, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping wrote an inscription for display at the Baldaling entrance of the Great Wall of China, commemorating restoration of the Great Wall.[9]

On the other hand, poorly executed calligraphy might also contribute to the demise of a political leader. For example it appears that his calligraphy may have contributed to the political demise of Hua Guofeng, one of the interim Party leaders after the deaths of Mao and Zhou Enlai, following the suppression of Tiananmen demonstrations of 1976. Reportedly, Hua's enemies, in the ensuing struggle for power, used complaints about his calligraphy to diminish his reputation, eventually resulting in his resignation and the forced removal of his calligraphy from public display.[10]

III

Thus far, the emphasis here has been on the political role of calligraphy in Chinese culture. This is not to say that human figuration had no important role in traditional Chinese culture, as it is featured in ritual objects and decorative arts, as well as in ancestral and commemorative

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[7] Kraus, *Brushes with Power*, 5.

[8] Dong Zhiying, ed., *Mao Zedong Yishi (*Tales of Mao Zedong*) (*Beijing: Kunlun Chubanshe, 1989), 76, 209-11.

[9] In 1472, a Ming scholar and calligrapher called Xiao Xian wrote the famous five characters in Chinese meaning "First Fortress under Heaven" at the entrance to the Shanhaiguan pass. His calligraphy is on a placard hanging on the top of the eastern gate.

[10] Kraus, *Brushes with Power*, 130-137. See Notes chapter 12, nos. 26-30.

portraiture.[11] The Terracotta Army discovered near Xian would suggest more than ritual function of the human figure as they embody the political power of Qin Shi Huang, first emperor of China (259-210 BCE), who was also the first to unify China. His achievements include initiating the first Great Wall of China and other numerous projects of a grand scale. Perhaps the most relevant for our purposes is the 8,000 member Terracotta Army discovered in 1974, buried near Qin's tomb and known as 'Qin's Armies'. These free standing life-size full-bodied figures of varying heights, uniform and hairstyle in accordance with their rank, equipped with weapons, were evidently intended to serve the emperor in his afterlife. They were part of a grand scheme with horses, chariots, and material goods sufficient to support a life of wealth. More interesting for our purposes is what the warriors have to say as a symbol of the emperor's power during his own earthly lifetime. To command the manpower—some 700,000 persons and the material resources to build the army of terra cotta soldiers and the underground environment in which they were placed—speaks volumes about the emperor's political power. I propose that these sculptures employing realist figures of the human body are an important instance of the role of the human body as a symbol of political power in Chinese history. The Qi'an warriors are not the first freestanding figures in history—the carved marble kouroi/kourai of the late Archaic Period in Greece (535 BCE-480 BCE) were earlier. But the mass production system using terracotta employed in their production is remarkable.

While there are examples of the uses of figurative, bodily images that appear to have had a role as symbols of political power in earlier Chinese culture, as in the case of the Qi'an warriors, it is not until the twentieth century that the human body holds a prominent place as a symbol of political power. As the imperial system of governance ended and a new republic was established in 1911 by Sun Yat-Sen, the call for reform in the social and political system was accompanied by a demand for a new art of the people. Influence from the west led artists and educators such as Gao Jianfu and others to adopt western figurative art to the development of new art in China based on a synthesis of

[11] See Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reacktion Books Ltd., 1997), ch. 3. Clunas explores the role of figuration in Chinese ancestral portraiture as ritual and commemorative works during the Ming period. Clunas understands the Chinese *xiang* as figure and links it particularly to representation of the human figure. See 103, 104.

Chinese and western art. Along with the new art came a desire to use this art as a means of influencing the thought patterns of the Chinese people.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Socialist Realism as adapted from the Soviet Union became the official art of the People's Republic. Art was altered to fit the political and educational needs of the new regime. The aims of carefully planned and implemented policies essentially organized artists for national reconstruction based on principles laid down in Mao's "Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature." A generation later, as the art favored distinctively Chinese themes, the focus shifted away from Soviet Realism to art that represented a fusion of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. In both of these developments, the role of the figure based on the human body takes on a new significance as paintings and posters are used to implement ideological strategies aimed to exercise power and influence over the minds and bodies of workers in all fields from the literati group of intellectuals to the peasants living in villages throughout the nation.

The paintings and posters were intended to provide models of ideal behavior. They represented an idealized view of political leaders and the life of the people. Party leaders, especially Mao, were shown as loyal, sacrificing, and devoted to the well being of the people. Artist Li Chunhua's famous portrait of Mao, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, represents the revolutionary leader, dressed in a long tunic carrying an oiled paper umbrella and shown against a background of hills, sky, and trees. "Mao was simply everywhere; his official portrait even hung in every home, often occupying the central place on the family altar … "[12] Mao and other Party leaders were often depicted alongside the people in the communes. See for example, Li Mubai's *Chairman Mao the Great Leader of the Chinese People*, 1950 where Mao, dressed in a military uniform is surrounded by four young children dressed in brightly colored blues and yellows, and bearing bouquets of pink and yellow flowers.[13]

The use of propaganda posters intensified during the Cultural Revolution period from 1966 to 1976, as "the hyperrealist representations of ageless, larger-than life peasants, soldiers and workers and

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[12] Stefan R. Lansberger, *Paint it Red: Fifty Years of Chinese Propaganda Posters*, Groninger Museum, December 5, 1998-February1999, 30.

[13] *Landsberger, Paint it Red,* 40.

educated youth in dynamic poses," males and females alike, were offered as ideal types.[14] Women thus gained some social advancement when portrayed as carrying out equal roles with men. Images of soldiers, factory workers in steel mills and shipyards, and rural villagers engaged in agriculture were portrayed as optimistic, resourceful people dedicated to contribute to the transformation of China. In some instances, the posters were devoted to concrete issues such as encouraging increased production of the factories and output from the agricultural communes.

Colors of the posters and paintings were carefully orchestrated in bright, shiny red; mainly absent in the posters were blacks and greys. The posters were mass-produced and widely distributed in order to provide the right models of thought and behaviour and to influence as many people as possible.

The paths of calligraphy and figurative art in the context of political power did not have entirely separate lives since figurative images in the poster art were normally accompanied by inscriptions written in calligraphy.

During the eighties, the political and economic culture of China changed significantly as the Party ceased to rely on propaganda posters to enforce political aims, relying instead on a new sense of openness to the west and receptiveness to a broader approach to art and less need to monitor daily life. At this point, both calligraphy and figurative art ceased to have the role that they had previously enjoyed. Figurative poster art thus lost its appeal and credibility and was no longer an effective symbol of political power. Symbols of power became more abstract as in the national flag consisting of five yellow stars on a red background, with considerably less attention to the portraits of the leaders.

IV

Although both calligraphy and figurative representations of the body may at the present time have lost some of their ability to function as symbols of power, they nevertheless remain of considerable interest to contemporary artists. I would like to end with a brief look at two contemporary Chinese artists, Xu Bing (b. 1955) and Ma Bao Zhong

[14] *Landsberger, Paint it Red* , 30.

(b. 1965), who, respectively, examine in their art aspects of the roles of political power in reference to calligraphy and figurative representations. Xu Bing is one of the most famous among contemporary Chinese artists both in the international art world and in China.[15] For Xu Bing, "language ... is the key to being human, and it lies at the crux of human culture."[16] Xu Bing's conceptual art piece, *The Book From the Sky* (1987), will serve to show the relevance of his work to our topic. *The Book From the Sky* consists of four books printed using more than four thousand characters, all of them invented by the artist and unreadable, but nevertheless familiar in their likeness to actual traditional Chinese calligraphy. According to a Smithsonian exhibition catalogue featuring Xu Bing's works, "the open books were displayed on low platforms with panels of text mounted on pillars and walls, and three long scrolls that ran up the wall and then draped in swooping arcs down from the ceiling."[17] Xu Bing's impossible texts forced viewers to disengage from their usual relationship with calligraphy. Literate Chinese viewers responded with incredulity and confusion. They were unwilling to believe that the texts could not be read, or that someone would invest so much effort to create the unreadable. For some viewers the experience is reported to have triggered deep emotional reactions.

The social outcome of Xu Bing's art and language experiments was to empower viewers to reflect on and perhaps to question the role of calligraphy in social and political life. His art is intended to be socially purposeful. In effect, the deployment of Xu Bing's invented calligraphy in *The Book from the Sky* questions the credibility of calligraphy and language in general. It thus challenges one of the chief vehicles for exercising political power by inviting the people to engage in critical

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[15] Xu Bing moved to the United States in 1990 and returned to China as Vice President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 2008.

[16] Britta Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institute and University of Washington Press, 2001), 59. This theme appears in a number of Xu Bing's installation artworks, *A Case of Transference* (1994) featured a pair of pigs placed in a cage to mate. The pigs were printed with an unintelligible text in calligraphy surrounded by books. Neither of these cultural inventions drew their attention away from nature's call to mating. *Net and Leash* (1998) addressed the role of language as a means of control available solely to human beings. For this work, Xu Bing commissioned a leash of words and a cage with mesh sides made of words. Viewers' gazes were returned by the gazes of placid sheep chained in the confines of the leash and wire fence of words.

[17] Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*, 38.

reflection on language and its role in political and societal life.[18] In short, Xu Bing's art diminishes the effectiveness of calligraphy's usefulness for propaganda.

Ma Baozhong, born in 1965, Heilongjiang Province, is a Chinese artist working in the post-socialist environment of Beijing.[19] Educated at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, he chose to learn his craft as a realist painter by examining the practices of western master painters from Michelangelo to Warhol. In his paintings, one finds traces of these artists as well as German artists Albrecht Durer, Caspar David Friedrich, Otto Dix, the Austrian Egon Schiele and the English artist Lucian Freud. His decision to paint in a western based style instead of following in the tradition of Chinese brush painting sets him apart from fellow artists who first grounded their work in Chinese art before experimenting with western pop art or abstract expressionist art styles. According to the artist, his decision to follow western art was influenced by the globalization of the art market and a perception that the future would favor art based on the art practices of a dominant western culture. This decision allowed him to set aside grappling with the question that many Chinese contemporary artists struggle with: how to connect traditional Chinese art with contemporary practices art practices influenced by western culture.

Despite his doubts about the value of traditional Chinese art for his work as a twenty-first century artist, Ma Bao Zhang is decidedly Chinese in his worldview and his outlook on the social and political issues facing persons living in the contemporary world. He proudly identifies with the values and aims of his national culture. This characteristic is reflected in his subjects, which include Chinese military personnel and political leaders, as well as ordinary citizens. At the same time, his interests extend to worldwide geo-political concerns.

Among the major narrative themes present in these paintings is power. What does this mean? Power refers to the ability of individual leaders and institutions to shape the lives of a people and steer the course of major developments economic, political, and cultural within national boundaries and across the global world. Political and military

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[18] See also Curtis L. Carter, "Conceptual Art: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?" *Aesthetics and/as Globalization*, International Yearbook of Aesthetics, editor, Aleš Erjavec,Volume 8, 2004, 15-29.

[19] An earlier version of this discussion of Mao Baozhong appeared in Curtis L. Carter, "Ma Baozhong: Creating a Visual Theater of Power," *Touch: Ma Baozhong's New* Works," Beijing: Beijing Art Gallery, 2008, 17-19.

power are the obvious targets in Ma Bao Zhong's works. Featured in his paintings are many larger than life portraits of contemporary Chinese leaders and a few other world political figures. Chairman Mao, Premier Cho En Lai, Peng-Zhen, mayor of Beijing, army General Helong and other prominent party officials appear in his latest works. There are also images of western leaders including Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

The sources for these images are themselves historical documents including official publications and newspaper accounts of important gatherings. If there are already images documenting the events, why is it necessary to reconstruct the images? The artist's answer would be that he transforms images from newspapers and historical documentaries into paintings to express his own ideas. The paintings are intended to offer a fresh point of view on the persons and events through their construction using complex forms and colors applied in the manner of Chinese folk painters. They offer a visual narrative that is neither ideological nor cynical. The national leaders are portrayed in a manner that implicitly acknowledges their role as executors of power. There is no explicit effort on the part of the artist to pass judgment on their successes or failures. Rather, the paintings ostensibly at least show the figures as human beings dutifully acting out their designated roles in public ceremonies. Nevertheless, their decisions will shape the course of history in their time.

Among the notable paintings in this mode is the painting *19 December 1984*, done in 1997. The painting depicts the signing of Sino-British joint declaration handing Hong Kong over to China on December 19, 1984 at the West Hall of the Great Hall in Beijing. (This painting was auctioned at Sotheby's in Hong Kong in a collection of unification art to celebrate the tenth anniversary, 1997 to 2007, of the transfer of Hong Kong from Britain to China.)[20]

Notwithstanding their roles in exercising power in the real world, in Ma Bao Zhong's paintings these powerful political leaders become

[20] *Los Angeles Times*, photo and caption, June, 2007. Only in a *Los Angeles Times* photograph previewing the Hong Kong auction, the tranquility of the painting is interrupted by the presence of two female Sotheby's employees in the foreground. The two figures posture in a confrontational mode intended to symbolize the underlying international tensions accompanying this historic event. Their energized bodily stances contrast dramatically with the solemn faces of the executors of power in Ma Baozhang's painting. Perhaps this *Los Angeles Times* newspaper photograph offers another opportunity for a painting by the artist. The auction took place June 26, 2006 in Hong Kong.

characters as in a theatrical drama. The paintings fictionalize their roles as political leaders and in doing so diffuse their power. Ma Bao's paintings are thus fictionalized theatrical narratives, as noted by the philosopher-critic Peng Feng. Their aim is to tell the stories of the leaders of China in a form that humanizes the brutality that can result when the exercise of power is not in harmony with the greater good of the people. Instead of making figurative paintings that serve as instruments of power for the political leaders, Ma Bao Zhong's paintings interpret and invite the viewers to reflect on the meaning of the political dramas being depicted and perhaps on the impact that the powerful actions of political leaders have on the lives of the people.

Especially interesting in this respect are four 'headshots' of Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, Bin Laden, and Che Guevara created in 2002. These portraits, executed in oil on canvas, show their subjects as super star cultural heroes. With a debt to Warhol's portraits of western entertainment figures, the portraits of Mao and Lin especially are like theatrical masks. Yet they are not without interest for their psychological profiling of their respective subjects as symbols of political power.

There is in Ma Bao's personal life a curious fascination for the military and for the instruments of war including weapons and military aircraft. It is not surprising thus to find that military power also has a strong presence in his paintings. In some of his works, an entire painting is devoted to a display of soldiers as in *Volunteer Army Headquarters*, 1991. In other paintings, a military presence fills the background behind a gathering of ordinary people. For example, *An Event*, 1995, depicts armed soldiers with tanks placed toward the back of the crowd featured in the foreground of the scene. Another approach to the subject shows fighter jets filling the skies above the portraits of female and male figures in *Stroke Series*, 2000 and also in *Gorazade*, 1995.

In his works portraying the military, Ma Bao revisits the theme of earlier western artists' responses to war. His works on this theme evoke remembrances of Goya's *Disasters of War*, Picasso's *Guernica*, and the battle scenes of Otto Dix responding to the war-torn social climate in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Like the contemporary American artist Jane Hammond's *Fallen*, a memorial installation composed of leaves fallen from trees, begun in 2004 and dedicated to young lives lost in Iraq, Ma Bao Zhong's paintings show the military presence in contemporary society. These works cannot help but remind us of the unsettling effects on the human condition of war and violence resulting from abuses of power.

Weapons play an important part in the imagery of Ma Bao's paintings. There are logical and practical connections between the artist's representations of power and weapons. When the military is not directly present in the pictures, weaponry may still function as a symbol of power. Weapons are one of the means of exercising military power.

Ma Bao Zhong's paintings remind us that power as manifest in political and military scenes also engages people on a personal level. On a personal level, the artist is fascinated by the material properties of weapons as objects with beautiful shapes and forms. Yet he seems mainly concerned with their societal purposes. Through his focus on weapons, he aims to disclose their meaning and role in the context of society. "My interest in weapons may come from the interest in [the] human itself. The weapons in my paintings…are supposed to serve the purpose of representing the humans."[21] Weapons accompanying figurative images assume this function in the series of portraits called *Series AK47*, 1998. In these works, the weapons become a part of the identity of the subjects. Perhaps weapons bring comfort to human beings caught in a world of change and uncertainties full of circumstances over which they have no control. In any event, they are an integral part of the portraits in this series relating to the theme of political power.

As an artist concerned about the future of civilization and the human condition, Ma Bao Zhong is aware that there are other forces that shape the meaning of human life apart from political and military power. For the most part, the people portrayed in his paintings show signs of tension and uneasiness. They are not happy, even those who have the power; the artist is not happy. Throughout, there is a sense of an insecure world where so many things are changing. Their destinies are in the hands of others.

Culture, which includes manifestations of human creativity as expressed through the fine and popular arts, diversity in ideas and life styles, fashion, even manifestations of sexuality, constitutes an important component of happiness and fulfillment for human beings. Despite the dominant theme of people under duress in these paintings, there are moments when these other cultural forces surface. If

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[21] "Some People Are in No Position to Choose," Ma Baozhong interview with critic Pi Li, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing, in *Ma Baozhong* (Beijing: Arts Press, 2006), p. 142.

only at the most basic human level, there are in the paintings overt and covert manifestations of sexuality in the portrayal of male and female representations of the human body, as in such works as *Target in Hawail,* 1999; *Backstage*, 2006 and the sketches referred to as 'rough'.[22] Depictions of women eyeing a man and men eyeing each other with sensuous intentions, as well as bare breasted and scantily clothed female figures, signal these basic human interests. It may be that such cultural and social diversions are the necessary antidotes to the abuses of political and military power.

In his decision to become an artist instead of a soldier, Ma Bao Zhong affirms that art itself is a form of cultural power. The power of art may serve primarily market interest of the economy, or, more importantly, it can function in other ways beneficial to the human spirit. The artist's power can be used to affirm, or to question when necessary, the directions taken in the exercise of other forms of power. When aimed at the search for knowledge and understanding benefitting the good of the people, the artist's voice is an essential part of a well-formed society. At times, Ma Bao Zhong may express doubts about his decision to become an artist as when he says, "If I were to choose once again, I would probably choose to be a soldier."[23] But not really.

Conclusion

The developments concerning the uses of both calligraphy and figurative art to reinforce political power exemplify a long standing practice in Chinese culture to make use of the arts including music, poetry, theatre, and paintings to communicate with the people the desired 'politically correct' policies and behaviours of the time. The use of calligraphy and figurative art in the propaganda posters of the recent Chinese history resulted in the mobilization of these arts as a primary means of exercising political power. Because of their role as a means of communication between the leaders and the people, an examination of the role of these two manifestations of the political body in Chinese culture provide an important source for understanding the develop-

[22] *Ma Baozhong,* 127, 134, 135, 143, 171.

[23] "Some People Are in No Position to Choose," Ma Baozhong interview with critic Pi Li, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing, in *Ma Baozhong* (Beijing: Arts Press, 2006), p. 142.

ment of modern China. In addition, they offer an important case for the study of art's relation to political power. As contemporary artists resume their task as interpreters and critics in post-revolutionary China, the uses of language and figurative representations of the body in the exercise of power again fall under the watchful eye of the artists who understand that they may participate in the brokering of power as well as in providing the tools for aiding in the use and abuse of power by others.

GENDERED BODIES IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Mary Bittner Wiseman

The idea of beauty in the west has often been connected with the idea of woman, whose beauty was celebrated in sculptures of the nude introduced in classical Greece and in paintings since the sixteenth century. The nude is not a genre in either traditional or contemporary Chinese art, however, and although there has been nakedness in the representations of the body in the contemporary art of China, its presence is marked by two characteristics that distance the Chinese naked from the western nude. One is that gender boundaries are not drawn in the same way in China as they are in the west. In China they are not based on oppositions: what it is to be a woman is not, for example, simply to lack the traits that makes someone a man. Gender difference does not, therefore, make so deep a cut in the conceptual schemes in Chinese thought as it does in those in the west.

The other is that the female body is not identified or valued as an object of male desire but as the site and possibility of its flowering, while the male body is typically presented as marked in some unusual way or performing some unusual action. Neither is identified as an object worthy of respect or interest for its own sake. Nor does the idea of beauty take refuge elsewhere in Chinese art. Beauty was not a value articulated or striven for by the artists of China, governed as they were by the six principles of painting articulated by Hsieth Ho in the fifth century.[1]

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[1] In the late fifth century, Hsieh Ho wrote a book called *Criticism of Painting* in which he listed six technical factors of painting and said of them that few artists mastered them all. He then ranked twenty-seven artists into six grades, depending on which techniques they mastered and how well. The importance of the paragraph in which he lists the factors cannot be underestimated. In *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art* (Putnam, 1967), Lin Yutang called it the most influential paragraph ever written on Chinese art and identified the first technique as the one undisputed goal of art in China.

Here are the techniques, with no interpretations given. "The first is: Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement. The second is: Bone manner

Relative gender indifference and indifference to the body as such were also present in the attitude toward and treatment of the sexes in the reign of Mao from 1949 to1976. But gone are the dark blue genderless suits of those days, and the body itself is on show in the art of the Chinese avant-garde. What exactly is on show? The brute presence, the there-ness and materiality of the body, its persistence despite the fragility of the memory of traditions, the instability of what count as social virtues and vices, and the uneven power of language to capture what is happening at the level wherein lies the possibility of what can be thought, felt, and said. And what might we learn from the avant-garde art's foregrounding of the materiality and persistence of the body? That art—born as it is of intuition and imagination—can express this fragility of memory, instability of values, and fallibility of language and enable its viewers to reconfigure their sightlines and habits of thinking, feeling and saying.

In the opening decades of the twenty-first century Chinese artists are asking *what art is* in the China made new by Deng Xiaoping's 1979 invitation to the west to invest in the natural and human resources of China. They might also ask about the Chinese-ness of the current art given that what is local in the new China is compromised by the country's now housing the formerly warring factions of the Cold War, communism and capitalism. While communism and capitalism do not exhaust the political and economic systems of the nations across the globe, they come near to doing so. There is, then, this simple sense in which the global has insinuated itself into the Chinese local. There is also a less simple way: the traits encouraged by capitalism sit uneasily next to those encouraged by the Cultural Revolution. The aim of this Revolution was further to erase the memory of imperial China and to abolish differences between city and country, intellectual and peasant, one individual and another. With capitalism, however, difference reigns, and the individual is increasingly on his or her own as the expansion of capitalism erodes "the idealism and altruism that once guided the Chinese conscience."[2]

(structural) Use of the Brush. The third is: Conform with the Objects (to obtain) Likeness. The fourth is: Apply the Colors according to the Characteristics. The fifth is: Plan and Design, Place and Position (i.e. composition). The sixth is: To Transmit Models by Drawing," that is, to copy the master. Hsieh Ho, "The Six Techniques of Painting" in *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art*, ed. and trans. Lin Yutang (New York: G. F. Putnam's Sons, 1967).

[2] "At the moment, China is witnessing a rapid growth in the economy, and with it comes unbridled greed and materialism. The idealism and altruism that once guided

China's artists are not only asking what art is, but also what it is to be Chinese in these times. And one way in which they are working out answers about art and Chinese-ness is through artworks, including installations and performances, which represent or use the body. This art is per force an art of the avant-garde because the continuity and life line of the history of the art of China was interrupted by Mao and because the rapid-fire introduction of the west's innovations and revisions of its own art history have come at such a pace as not to have had time to settle in and be naturalized by artists in China. It is an art that has lost its moorings in its own history and in western modern art. Functioning below the level of discourse, where the murmurings of classical China and the modern west can be heard along with the gradually fading voice of Mao, it is the laboratory in which criteria for something's being art and someone's being Chinese are being forged. It can, then, be called 'experimental', which is what art of the avant-garde is.

Such connection as contemporary Chinese art has with the art of the west is superficial because the art being made by Chinese artists incorporates neither the problems western artists were trying to solve nor the questions they were using their art to answer. The problems, questions, and tensions that drive the art of the Chinese avant-garde can be addressed at the level of the body, at a level more or less immune to the ideologies of communism and capitalism, to the distance between the classical past and the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and to the overlap between the local and the global.

The body in avant-garde art can be put into two frameworks: one, that of the absence of the nude in the art of China and the other, that of the failure of communication between Chinese and western feminisms that became clear in the course of an art journey made along the route of Mao's Long March in 2002. Lu Jie, the convener of the Long March, sought to explain the failure as follows: "We are interested in feminist art in China, which has a very different genealogy and timetable from feminist art in the west, and particularly in America. Even though Chinese 'feminist art' started to develop more recently than in the West, it grows out of a different context. In fact, part of the com-

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the Chinese conscience are gradually eroding. Like what the Cultural Revolution did, the money-centered mentality of today has threatened to destroy the Chinese character." From a project proposal by New York-based artist Zhang Jianjun that is quoted in Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 206.

munist revolution was about feminism, and through the People's Republic there have been certain official manifestations of feminism quite different from what you see in the west, and which came before the women's movements of the 1970s."[3]

One reason for the failure of communication between feminist artists in contemporary China and in the west is that representations of women in the work of the Chinese artists tend to be about the women themselves rather than, as in the work of western artists, about how they are regarded by men. Before we look at the mode of presence of male and female bodies in contemporary art, however, consider the absence of the nude in this art.

The Absent Nude

The making, not the made, has traditionally been valued in the art of China, as it has been in its thought. Process, not product, and energy, not form, underlie and constitute the real. This is why the path of the flow of energy through the body, rather than anatomy, has been the lodestar of Chinese medicine, and why the human form does not have the role in Chinese art that it has in the art of the west. The gestures of the ink-drawn human or clay-modeled figures, the folds and curves of their robes and sleeves represent the path of the energy, the life force, the breath—what the God of *Genesis* breathed into the figure of clay that became Adam—and capture what is important to the Chinese about the human figure.

In the Guimet Museum of Asian Art in Paris is a pair of terracotta female dancers from the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD). (Figure 24) The women bend toward each other, one knee on the ground, spine, neck, and piled-high hair in a continuous curve, arms outstretched, each with one bent and one straight, their deep sleeves in motion. Their

[3] While studying curating in London, Lu Jie examined the memory of his "individual experience in China as a connection with the collective memory and consciousness of the quest for revolution." He was struck by the "romantic clash of idealism and pragmatism" in the Long March through China that began in October 1934 on which the beleaguered Communist Army was on the run and yet the marchers were "constantly thinking the unthinkable, trying to imagine a new society." He found this Long March Methodology at work in the production of the many non-binary meanings in the course of the current "transformation of the Chinese system—the translations, the different ideologies, locations, and geographies." Quotations are from the website: www.longmarchspace.com/english/e-discourse20.htm.

gaze is at the ground from which the rhythm of their bodies seems to rise: the space around, the earth under, and the gowns covering them are one. The body's form, as such, does not stand out. Put a polo stick in the hand of the dancing woman, put her astride a horse in the company of like-outfitted women and let the game of polo that China inherited from Sassanidean Persia begin. A number of such figures sport on a wall in the Guimet. Motion is everywhere: the horses run, the women lean with arms outstretched, and women and horses are one. These are funerary figures destined to play forever in the tombs of the privileged.

Move now from the Tang Dynasty to the turn of the twenty-first century, from women to men, motion to stasis, and free-flowing to constrained energy. In a performance called *Breathing* (1996), the artist Song Dong lay face down for about forty minutes at night in Tiananmen Square where the temperature was minus 9 degrees centigrade and, again, for about forty minutes during the day on Back Sea, a frozen lake in the old quarter of Beijing whose temperature was minus 8 degrees centigrade. In Tiananmen Square, a thin layer of ice formed on the cement surface where Song breathed; the ice onto which he breathed on Back Sea was unchanged.

Song Dong's breath, like the dancers' energy, is what Hsieth Ho's first principle of painting would have the artist express: 'Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement'. Song's body was joined with the surfaces on which he lay as intimately as were the dancers with the space within which they moved. Between the times and places on which he lay and breathed were these differences: night and day; a cultural and a natural site; earth covered with cement and water with ice; Song's breath made a difference on the Square and not on the Sea. Whatever moral one might be tempted to draw from the result of his experiment, it was through his breathing on the surfaces to which he gave himself up that Song expressed the spirit, vitality, and life that Hsieth Ho would have an artist express in the act of making art. Song Dong in his performance showed himself to be one with the life that flows through all there is: heaven, earth, and human being, as the artist who made the Tang figures showed them to be one with the rhythm of the world.

In *Printing on Water* (1996), Song Dong took a wooden block on which the character for water was carved and tried to print it on the water in a sacred river in Lhasa, bringing the block down onto the water again and again. In each case it was the gesture and the *place* in

which the gesture was made that mattered, not whether it produced something lasting. In *Breathing*, Song did what one does to breathe life into someone and in *Printing on Water*, what one does to print a character by hand. *Breathing* occurred in places on which the history of China has been written and on which a massacre had occurred on June 4, 1989 (Tiananmen Square) and in which ancient buildings are being demolished to make way for the new (neighborhood of the Back Sea). *Printing on Water* was not performed on just any water, but on water in a river deemed holy by the people of Buddhism-rich Tibet.

The sustained (breathing on the ground for forty minutes) and repeated (bringing of the block down) activity, not any resulting product, is what comprises the art in these two works. In classical Chinese aesthetic theories, there is art when an artist captures the spirit, vitality, or life movement of some object or activity through the use of the brush (of a traditional artist) or the body (of a performance artist) by giving herself up to the vital movement so that she transfers its resonance in her to the medium in which she is working. Song Dong did what one does when one breathes and when ones prints: he attended to his breathing by attending to nothing else, and he repeatedly brought the character block down even though his repeated motions did not 'take'—he was just doing what one does when one prints.[4]

The sculpted bodies dance and play polo, the performing bodies breathe and print. In neither case, not in the time of the Tang dynasty or now, is the body any more than a vehicle for the vitality of the universe, the site of the energies passing through it and keeping it in existence, not as in western post-structuralism the site of the languages passing through and identifying it. The artist as described in the Chinese treatises on painting is a person who can look at a mountain long enough for it to reverberate in him so that when, having cleared his mind and quieted his spirit, he picks up the brush and the brush, ink, hand, and wrist so move in harmony with the mountain that it reappears on the paper.

If the body as such is not of moment in Chinese art, then the nude is not going to be. In particular, it is not going to define a genre whose members portray the ideal human body, stripped bare, with nothing

[4] This has a parallel in Immanuel Kant's analysis of the judgment of the beautiful: an object is judged beautiful when the understanding and imagination of the object's perceiver are working harmoniously as they would be if the perceiver were—as he is not—bringing the object under a concept. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 50.

hidden and nothing to hide. With no past and no future—because it is an ideal—there is for the west's nude no becoming and no passing away: it exists only in the present and is fully present, as only Being is.[5] Not only do representations of the unclothed human body not define a genre in the art of China, but the job for which the nude is conscripted in the west is not one the Chinese would choose. For on the Chinese view of the world, there is only what is not quite yet and what is already starting to leave: there is no pure presence. There is, that is to say, only coming to be and passing away. Unlike depictions of the nude in western art, representations of the body in Chinese art do not stop the flow of the world and the passage of time. Nor is it, as Courbet's *Birth of the World* implies, the source of the world itself.[6]

The Present Body

Nevertheless, bodies are represented in paintings, photographs, and videos and are presented in performances in contemporary Chinese art even though they do not call attention to themselves but to what they are doing or are being used to do. Experimental artists use the image or presence of the body to do what they have also used calligraphy to do, namely, divest the subject of their art of its received meaning.

Chinese characters are lines and shapes that have meaning, and calligraphy can be looked at either for the vitality and grace of its brush strokes or for what the strokes convey: signifier or signified can occupy center stage. The marriage of the prima facie incompatible theories of communism and capitalism and the relation of the present power brokers in the People's Republic of China to its recent and distant past have unsettled China's relation to language. Signifiers slip and slide over what they are supposed to signify, as stable meaning is all but lost. Contemporary China seems not to be intelligible at the level of dis-

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[5] An elegant explanation of the absence is to be found in Francois Jullien, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics,* trans. Maeve de la Guardia (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[6] Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World*, 1866, oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm. Paris, D'Orsay Museum. A naked female figure—cropped mid-thigh and below the shoulders—lies on the diagonal on a rumpled white sheet. Black background is visible at the upper left corner of the picture plane. It and the woman's public hair are the only dark things. It is an anatomically detailed vagina, the origin of the world, to which the title alludes.

course, and artists declare this by making works that enact the divorce of signs from their meanings.

What is it, however, to divest the human body of meaning? Or what is the analogue with respect to the body of stripping language of its meaning? Since Chinese thought does not distinguish mind from body, which it holds to be as en-spirited as mind is embodied, to divest the body of meaning is not to divest it of spirit or mind nor to treat it as an empty shell, the corpse-like thing that Descartes holds body to be. Not only is mind not distinct from body in Chinese worldviews, but also a person is not distinct from his or her social environment. Indeed, under Mao the raison d'etre of everyone was to serve the social collective. The idea that this is what gives individuals their meaning and purpose is being rethought in much of the art of the Chinese avant-garde. The question of what can be the purpose and source of meaning for a human life is what occupies and shapes much of the work of the avant-garde. The idea that a person exists for the state has not simply been replaced with the western Enlightenment notion of men and women as rational self-interested individuals who exist for themselves alone, however. The matter is more complicated, and more interesting.

The hard fact of the body, dependent as it is on food, water, air, and shelter, but not on a ready-made world, is one locus of artists' asking about where and how individuals can fit into a post-Mao China. What is on show now that the collective character of the body has been dealt a blow by the removal of the genderless Mao suit and the individual body comes into view? The body is being reworked through its representations in avant-garde art in much the same way as is the Chinese language. For example, in Xu Bing's *Book of the Sky* (1987-1991), open, hand-printed books on wooden mounts are installed in rows on the floor and scrolls hang from ceiling and walls. All are printed from four thousand hand-carved blocks of characters, and the materials and techniques used in their production are true to the prescriptions of classical Chinese printing, scroll design, and bookbinding. However, Xu Bing invented the characters, and they are illegible. The *Book from the Sky* cannot be read.

Avant-garde artists are treating the body in the uncommon way that Xu Bing treats the Chinese language. Look first at two works whose subject is language—Xu Bing's *Square Words—New English Calligraphy* (1994-1996) and Wenda Gu's *United Nations: Babel of the*

Millennium (1999)—and then at two that use the body to question the relation of language to the human subject.

In Xu Bing's square word calligraphy, altered English letters are combined in a square format to form words that are then combined in rows and columns to form sentences. The installation is a classroom with a video monitor that shows the artist demonstrating calligraphy, and material with which the audience/student can practice. A most accessible example is a rectangle with black ground and white letters arranged in three columns and four rows. Reading the left hand column from top to bottom, we find 'Little Bo Peep Little/Bo Peep Has Lost/Her Sheep And Can … ' and the story continues. This is not, however, just a fusion of the two languages but "draws upon principles of calligraphy to make the Chinese legible to an English-speaking audience, while insisting upon a formal structure that remains Chinese."[7] The calligraphy is neither Chinese nor English, but both. The forms of the letters and sentences are Chinese; the meanings of the words they make are not.

In 1993 Wenda Gu started using hair collected from around the world to make installations that comprise the *United Nations* series; some of the installations involve language. *United Nations: the Babel of the Millennium* (1999) was commissioned for the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: it consists of one hundred and sixteen sheer vertical panels of woven hair on which are written pseudo-characters in each of Chinese, English, Hindi, and Arabic—three eastern and one western language—as well as a fusion of English and Chinese.[8] The words may lack meaning, but the geography—China, India, and the oil-rich countries of the Middle East, with English fusing with Chinese—does not, nor does the fact that the unreadable words are written on panels of hair. People use their voices to speak, ears to hear, hands to write, eyes to read, and while spoken words do not stay (unless captured and stored electronically), written ones typically do. They stay on papyrus, on clay, on stone, on paper, and, now, on something made not from plant or earth but from the human body—or on the body itself.

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[7] Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milan and New York: Charta Art Books, 2006), 92.

[8] For the importance in contemporary Chinese art of the particular material used in a work, see my "Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-garde Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (2007) and "Water and Stone: On the Role of Expression in Chinese Art," forthcoming in *Journal of Aesthetics* in China. Pages 3 to 21 and 213 to 247, respectively, in this volume.

There is a way to put language to an unusual use that connects it intimately with the body—by writing on it. A westerner might be inclined to interpret an artist's writing on his body—as Zhang Huan wrote the names of his ancestors on his face for the series of nine chromogenic prints in *Family Tree* (2001)—as his showing the primacy of the materiality of the signifier. But this hardly need be shown to a Chinese audience: calligraphy is as valued for the quality and rhythm of its lines as for the meanings of the characters. It is close cousin to painting in that both are produced by the movement of the artist's wrist and hand with its ink-filled brush, a movement whose curves reproduce those of the Tang dancers and polo players. Calligraphy, painting, and dancers are movement captured by ink, paper, and clay.[9]

In the first of the nine photographs that comprise *Family Tree* the frame shows only his neck and the top of his dark-clad shoulders. About half of his face is character-free, while the other half bears names of his ancestors, a fraction of whose genes are his. Their genetic code is encoded in his genes as their names are written on his face, and since approximately half of the traits handed down by the ancestors are expressed in him, we see his forebears in him as clearly as we see their names on his face. The point might be that so much of a person is composed of his genetic past that it is as though his lineage were written on his face. But it need not be, precisely because the ancestors are already there in his genes. This is but the first in the series of photographs in which the man's face is increasingly covered with names so that by the last one, only his eyes show through the black ink that blankets his face.

This can be read as a demystification of ancestor-veneration, saying that the individuality of anyone whose filial piety leads him to submit himself to and identify himself by his lineage will be erased. However, the ancestors' names themselves become unreadable as the man's face becomes unrecognizable. Is the last photograph in the series an argument for the primacy of the genetic over the linguistic? That is to say that the ancestors' names become unreadable does not matter because the forebears persist in the genes of their progeny: one's genetic inheritance is what it is independent of one's acknowledgement of or respect

[9] Legend has it that Wang Xizhi, whose style of calligraphy shaped much later Chinese art, was influenced in the development of his style by watching geese fly, by the bending of their wings and the curve of their necks.

for those through whom it came. That the individual becomes unrecognizable does not matter because the individual offspring is important only for the genes he can pass on. Or the series could be a light-hearted reductio ad absurdum of the practice of identifying oneself by reciting from whom one came: "I am son of A who is son of B" and so on. The subject in the photographs tries to write (identify) who he is on himself, and the effort self-destructs.

In Qiu Zhijie's *Tattoo 1* (1997) the separateness of a body, not of an individual from his family tree or a name from a gene, is sacrificed to the word, and the word is 'no' or 'not'. The photograph is of the artist, who is shown standing shirtless in front of a plain off-white ground. His body is shown cropped at the waist, and he stares straight ahead. The body is painted with a large red sign whose horizontal covers the artist's mouth, silencing him, and reaches almost to the edges of the picture plane. Vertical and diagonal lines reach down and across his chest. Most of the Chinese character is on his body, but some is on the wall with the result that the character signifies 'no' or 'not" only so long as the man's body is not taken away from its background, the off-white wall.

So long as the character has meaning and is taken to obliterate the space between it and the wall, the man is not some significant thing independent of the sign and the wall. He cannot claim the impossible space between the sign and the wall. If, however, the sign is read as what it is, an optical trick, then were the man to move away from the wall, the red brush strokes would cease to form the sign for 'no', and the man would be some thing apart from his background or context. Just as a person cannot say 'I am not', so no one can pin a sign on another that says '[he is] not'. The other has to be present to be so signed. Either the man is a real and separate entity (and the character does not mean 'not') or the brush strokes have meaning (and the man is a phantasm). Either 'not' makes impossible the existence of the individual, or it ceases to have meaning.

What is on show in these photographs of a man's head and a man's body? Language. There are pictures aplenty of bodies, but not written-on bodies. People use language. Here artists are using their bodies to protest the power of language, to protest the supposition that if the human body were not specified, singularized, reified by language, it would meld into the earth and sky of which it is a part, just another vehicle for the life movement that courses through everything. The words in *Family Tree* merge the individual with his ancestors, blacking

him out. The word in *Tattoo 1* does something more complicated by setting up an existential contradiction: the sign has meaning if and only if the body does not exist (as a thing extended in three dimensions). If signs keep their familiar meanings, the individual is blacked out. In each of these two artworks, the body is assaulted by language in what amounts to an assertion that the identity of contemporary Chinese men and women is threatened by the weight of their lineage and the received meanings of the mélange of discourses—political, economic, and social— now in place in China.

Chinese Landscape—Tattoo (1999) by Huang Yan is another photograph in which the body is the ground, not for language as in *Family Tree* and *Tattoo 1,* but for landscapes. (Figure 25) The artist covered a model's chest and arms with white powder and painted on the body in the manner of the Chinese scholar artists. Huang said, as the scholar artist might have:

> Mountains and rivers are my way of reasoning; … mountains and rivers are where my heart and soul find peace; mountains and rivers are where my physical body belongs; … I am an avant-garde ink painter who paints mountains and rivers on my body; … I believe in instinct, I believe in mountains and rivers, I kill time in mountains and rivers.[10]

And again: "landscape is an abode in which my mortal body can reside, landscape is my rejection of worldly wrangling, landscape is a release for my Buddhist ideas."[11]

The photograph can be interpreted as saying either that so deep is the connection of the Chinese people to nature that its rivers and mountains are metaphorically inscribed on their bodies or that the world is now upside down: the physical body is not in nature but nature is (represented) on the body. There is, however, a reading that eschews talk of metaphor and representation and takes the photograph to speak to the identification of human beings with nature. Rivers and mountains, their water and stone, and human beings are physical things. How can human beings identify with these elements

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[10] Artist statement by Huang Yan in Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2004), 206. Published in conjunction with the exhibition "New Photography and Video from China" at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.

[11] www.vam.ac.uk/vasatic/microsites/1369_between_past_future/exhibition.php. Click on "Reimagining the Body" and choose the photographer Huang Yan from the photographer menu.

of their land? Rivers and mountains are *in* the body as blood and bone, and in *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo* they are *on* the body as a drawing. The artist makes the past present by painting as the scholar artists did and by declaring his fealty to the mountains to which it is increasingly hard to surrender oneself—by surrendering his body, his skin, to them.

Ancestors, Chinese calligraphy, scholar artists, the mountains and rivers that define the landscape of China, are all, lest they be forgotten, both acknowledged and put into question by the bodies in the photographs called *Family Tree*, *Tattoo 1*, and *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo*. In these works, bodies are the site of artists' questioning, quarreling with, reconfiguring, and, finally, preserving their tradition, their language, and their land. What is passing through the body-representations by these avant-garde artists is not exactly the 'Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement' of all there is. Rather, the body-representations are the site of the artists' working through questions brought to the fore by the split in the social fabric caused by the political and economic changes of the last three decades, working them through at the level of instinct and matter, below the level of language. The energy released in the artists and their work by this rupture is a version of the vibration of vitality classical artists sought to express in their work. A robust materialism is at work at the level at which art is currently being made: it is a level at which *bodies* are the most real things.

The works discussed so far have been by men. Song Dong used his body in *Breathing* to mark with his breath, which is his life, two historically significant sites in Beijing lest their past be forgotten, and in *Printing on Water* to demonstrate the failure of coition between word and thing. In each case the body did something, In *Family Tree*, *Tattoo 1* and *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo*, the bodies do not do anything but are the passive subjects of their artists' ideas. They are, nonetheless, resolutely present in the artworks, and resolutely male.

The Female Body

The materialism strikes a different chord when the material bodies are female. Their presence in works of art is not apt to be as vehicles through which to rethink the contemporary Chinese person's relation to her language or tradition or to be as objects for the male gaze, as

often it is in western art. It is natural to ask what the presence of bodies, naked or clad, in works of Chinese avant-garde art can tell us about current perceptions of the feminine and of gender difference. It is appropriate, as well as natural, to look for answers in works by women. The first reason is that ideas about women and the feminine have typically been articulated by men and have tended, therefore, to ignore the experiences of women. To insist on the importance of this does not commit one to claim that women experience things differently from men. It is sufficient that in many circumstances women are regarded and treated differently from men and that the experience of their own bodies belongs to them alone.

The second reason is reflected in something said by Chen Lingyang in an interview with Melissa Chiu:

> MC: Feminism has had an entirely different history here in China and I think there would probably be a tendency to see your works in the light of Chinese feminism. How do you feel about this, and what do you think about this identification? CL: I don't care if people think I'm a feminist. I have had a hard time with people. The first time I heard this term, it was used sarcastically by a professor of mine to describe a social phenomenon. … China is still very much a patriarchal society. MC: Wouldn't you say your works represent a feminist perspective? CL: Maybe a better way to say it would be that *my works have to do with myself, and I am a woman*."[12] (Emphasis added.)

The force of Chen's last words is heightened by her response to having been asked if feminist artists working in the United States in the 1970s were role models: "I worked from my own feelings and needs rather than very diligently going through art history. When you talk about art and the fundamentals you can't start from someone else's work."[13]

Chen was talking about *Twelve Flower Months* (1999-2000), her series of twelve photographs of her menstruating body combined with the flower associated with the month. Each photograph has the shape of a garden pavilion window, each of which is different, and each of the body-images is seen through a differently shaped mirror. The background of all but three is black, and all are quiet and elegant. The wonder of them is that instead of the mirror's reflecting a flower or the face of a beautiful woman, it reflects the possibility of her flowering. There is no narrative arc here, only repetition. A woman's periods

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[12] Interview of Chen Lingyang by Melissa Chiu in *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China,* 177.

[13] Ibid.

follow the rhythm of nature and mark the movement of life through the species. The photographed streams of blood are a material analogue of what Hsieth Ho's first principle of Chinese painting would have each artwork capture and express.

The mirrors, window shapes, and month-associated flowers are from the dynastic tradition, whereas the subject matter of the photographs is not. But in its sheer materiality, the subject attests to the primacy in avant-garde art of the fundamental workings of the body: Song Dong breathes and Chen Lingyeng bleeds. Bodies breathe and menstruate without the cooperation of the agent whose body it is and despite the socio-political context in which it occurs. Where western abstract expressionists sought to give free rein to the instincts of the unconscious, and surrealists celebrated the fabricating talents of the unconscious in giving them rein, artists of the Chinese avant-garde go into the body, not the mind, to tap into something primitive that can break through the scrim of all that communist-capitalist culture has constructed.

The triptych of chromogenic prints, *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995) by Xing Danwen, uses the naked body of a pregnant woman to tell a story of the changing influence of Mao. (Figure 26) The middle photo is more than twice as wide as the two side ones (30 inches to13.48 inches), giving the work the shape of a scroll. The woman is a friend of the artist, and the title refers to the birth in 1966, the first year of the Cultural Revolution, of this woman who soon will give birth. In the large middle panel, shot from below—so the viewer looks up to her—the woman's torso and the lower part of her face, obscured by her hair, occupies the right half of the picture plane. The upper left hand corner of the plane has a picture of Mao, about half the size of the woman's torso. Behind it and the woman one and a half of the four small stars on the Chinese Communist flag appear, the whole star touching her shoulder. The small stars stand for the people of the People's Republic of China—peasants, workers, bourgeoisie, and capitalists. The woman, pregnant, is equivalent to one and a half.

In each of the side panels, the woman looks out at the viewer. In the right hand panel, shot from above—and the viewer looks down on her—the flag falls gracefully from the frame of a painting of a reclining woman, clothed, to serve as a backdrop for the naked pregnant woman lying on her side in the direction opposite the woman in the picture. The same picture of Mao as was in the middle pane, now much smaller, is poised above the pregnant woman's head, as the body of the woman

in the painting is above her body. (Mao has authority over her mind as the figure in the painting has over her body.) The painting, the folds of the fabric linking it with the pregnant woman, her relaxed pose, all connect this with the western tradition of putting sensuous women's bodies on display. In the left panel, on the other hand, all is business. The woman is standing with head turned as though just interrupted, and we see in another room a table on which machine, perhaps a printer, sits. On a narrow strip of wall behind the woman is a reproduction of a painting from Li Shan's *Rouge Series* (1990), one of a feminized young Mao, with two standard pictures of Mao under it. Her body is shown cropped mid-torso, her pregnant belly no longer the subject of the work.

Reading the scroll-like triptych from right to left, we see, first, woman voluptuous and sensual; then, woman whose body is given up to her pregnancy, to Mao, and to the People's Republic; and, finally, woman as matter of fact, one who happens to be pregnant, standing under a picture of Mao as a young woman. The swelling breasts and stomach of the female, echoed by the supple folds of the draped flag in the right hand panel, portray a figure men would desire. Move from how woman looks to what her biological function is: the focus of the woman-body in the large middle panel is what is inside. She is pregnant and that is wherein her woman-ness lies. Move to the left hand panel, which portrays a scene where gender matters little. The triptych ends with a picture of a young woman looking out at the viewer and standing under a picture of Mao seen no longer as a commanding figure but as a young woman. That the subject of the photograph is naked shows only that she needs no disguise. This is nakedness as a material, not a social, fact, and not a lure: it says 'this is my body', that's all.

Clothes are needed in social space and time, but not by the woman whose large image is the subject of Chen Lingyang's nighttime photograph (22 by 68 inches) called *25:00, No*. 2 (2002) because there is no 25 o'clock. Here the real world is resolutely urban. It is a cityscape with vertical skyscrapers in the middle ground and horizontal five or six-story buildings in the foreground. Little traffic is on the streets, and the only lights are a few illuminated signs and lit windows. The building in the dead center of the middle ground is perpendicular to the picture plane, while the parallel buildings slant toward it and a far distant vanishing point.

Along the length of the roof of the middle building lies a naked woman, as tall as the building is long. Face down, arms at her side, head and long black hair hanging over the building's side, she is a study in stillness. Her body captures the enormity and power of the sleeping city to which she submits yet over which she has sway. Her body is pale, the sky, a horizontal band taking up less than the top quarter of the picture plane, a middling blue. Buildings and streets are various shades of blue-gray, none so pale as her body or so blue as the sky. Together the two reign over the city. In the night sky the moon appears, its cycle the cycle of blood photographed in the artist's *Twelve Flower Month*s. It is fitting, then, that the artist has the female join with the night sky to rein in the male world that, she says, often gets mixed up in her mind with the real world.

> They both come from outside me; they both exist very forcefully, with initiative, power, and aggression. Facing these two worlds, I often feel that I am weak and helpless, and don't know what to do. … I wish that every day there could be a certain time like 25:00, when I could become as large as I like, and do whatever I want.[14]

The picture is a wish fulfillment, and the first wish is that her body should be as large as she would like it to be.

In *Twelve Flower Month*s and *Born with the Cultural Revolution*, the female body is expressed in its closeness to nature through menstruation and gestation and in *25:00 No. 2,* in a fancied complicity with the night sky, as both female body and sky hover over the dense city rather as Gerard Manley Hopkins's Holy Ghost hovers over the world.[15] In none of the works is movement or gesture in view. The female reproductive system does what it does independently of the movements of the woman whose system it is, and *25:00 No. 2* pictures a sleeping dreamer. No motion there.

Look now at a work in which gesture predominates and the body speaks through its posture rather than its form. *Sanjie* (2003) by Cui Xiuwen is a video shown on thirteen screens in which a little girl assumes the positions of the twelve apostles and Jesus in Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. (Figure 27) Before going into each posture, she

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[14] Ibid., 203.

[15] In reference to "God's Grandeur" by Gerard Manley Hopkins: "And though the last lights off the black West went/ Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs—/ Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." *A Selection of His Poems and Prose* by W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penquin Books Inc., 1953), 27.

stands up straight in front of the camera, and then "exceedingly slowly, takes up a pose, like an actress, with an astonishing intensity and verity. And when she has taken up the exact position of the model," she straightens up and bursts out laughing, a little girl again.[16] The clothes she wears are as significant as her gestures: they bespeak the time of the Cultural Revolution, as the gestures bespeak the setting of a grand betrayal that set in motion the revolution Christendom effected largely in the western world.

The girl wears a white shirt with a red scarf under its collar and a pleated blue-checked skirt. Of the red scarf, the symbol of the Young Pioneer Group, the artist said that it

> represents a period in my memory, a mark of belonging to a certain generation, the desire to gain honor, the exciting and yet unsettling sentiment of being urged on by the martyrs who created the People's Republic, and even more so, the doubt and the quest of identifying the relationship between the individual and the group,

and of the white shirt, that it "was always so white, white even in dreams, and yet it also created an image that was not exactly so white and pure."[17] That image could be of things not so pure done in the name of the People's Republic or of the color of history fading and memory becoming vague and unreliable. The clothes and their color evoke a mood and a memory that make vivid the glory and burden of the People's Republic.

The memories are uneasy because the years from 1966 to 1976 are put into as deep a shadow by China's embrace of capitalism as was the shadow into which the Cultural Revolution put imperial China. The turn to capitalism was driven less by contradictions inherent in the world spirit's march toward self-consciousness or workers' growing resistance to exploitation by capital than by the electronic revolution. Therefore those trying to understand and adjust to the changes occurring in China in the early twenty-first century are denied the comfort of familiar explanatory theories grounded in historical determinism.

Under the sway of memories of the last heady decade of high Maoism and the sentiments they evoke, Cui Xiuwen does not go to a place below the level of language to that of instinct and matter as do many avant-garde artists, but to a time before the individual gets

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[16] Michel Nuridsany, *China Art Now* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 2004), 238.

[17] www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com.content&task=view&id=6019&ltemid=155

caught in the web of language. Once the individual is immersed in language, she at risk of losing touch with what is on language's other side—the stillness that can put one in touch with 'the deep heart's core' of things.[18] She goes to the innocence of childhood: "I erase the whole process of growing up and let this girl bear the consequence of history. I let her balance herself in the process of breaking up, converging, evolving, and duplicating."[19] For this is what happens to the consequences of history when the present seeks to undo some of what the past has wrought: the historied past breaks up into shards that then either converge with elements in the present, evolve into something new, or blindly repeat.

The artist goes to the innocence not only of childhood, but also of gesture. The body speaks true in a way that words do not. Gestures, like words, can lie and be ambiguous or vague, but the gesturing body's physiological responses can be tamed only with an enormous amount of training and discipline. Fear, worry, embarrassment, shame, and much more write themselves on the bodies of those experiencing them. The body tells tales just as words do.

In the subject of *Sanjie* there is this trio: the truth of the expression of the girl's body, the memory of the fifties through the seventies in her clothes, and the figures in da Vinci's *Last Supper* whose gestures she copies. In the media in which the subject is presented, there is another trio: an oil painting that was finished first, a photograph, and the video. It has been called "a composite artwork created with three methods," bringing to mind the triple accomplishments of the scholar artists who often put poetry, calligraphy, and painting into one work. In 2005 *Sanjie* was sold at auction in New York City as *The Three Realms (Sanjie)*. Were a fourth realm to be added and terracotta statues made of the girl in each of the gestures, the statues of the little girls in their expressive postures could take their place along side the Tang dancers and polo players in Paris's Guimet Museum.

The robust materialism in play in many avant-garde representations of male bodies has been said to strike a different chord when the

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[18] The phrase is from the last verse of William Butler Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree": "I will arise and go now, for always night and day/ I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore,/ While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,/ I hear it in the deep heart's core." *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*: Definitive Edition, With Author's Final Revisions (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 39.

[19] www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com.content&task=view&id=6019&ltemid=155

bodies represented are female. The chord sounded in *Twelve Flower Months* and *Born with the Cultural Revolution* is of the body's flowering and in *25:00 No. 2*, it is of a dream of the woman-body. In each work *the woman-body* itself is the subject—for what it does perforce or for its dream of itself. The bodies are not as those in *Family Tree*, *Tattoo 1*, and *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo*, surfaces on which puzzles about language and nature are displayed, to be trumped by the bodies that 'wear' them. Although puzzles are typically worked out in the mind, avant-garde artists put them on bodies to show mind not always to be adequate to them.

These male bodies are not necessary for the jobs they are represented as doing, however; whereas the female bodies are: even the body dreaming of its complicity with the moon and its rhythms. Their sex is what is necessary. But sex is not gender. While many male artists use their representations of bodies to raise questions in a highly conceptual art, many female artists go to a place deeper than reason to discover their woman-ness in a highly expressive art. They go to what goes on in their bodies and to what their bodies can be used to express, which is what *Sanjie* and the Tang dancers do.

Sex is not in play in *Sanjie,* but gender is. The little girl is the only one in the works discussed in the sections on the body that is clothed, and her clothes signify, as the curves of the robes of figures in classical art contribute to the expression of the vital rhythm of the earth and the sky. Here the clothes signify not the rhythm of the world but a set of desires and aspirations, a movement of the spirit of a time. Hers is also the only body that moves or gestures. Through her movements she is in harmony with the play of the world and of the human heart, with the faith and doubt, the love and fear that coursed through the men at the *Last Supper*, the men whose body language the little girl's body speaks.

Gender is in play in *Sanjie* because its artist is a woman. In her words, she has erased the whole process of growing up by making a little girl the subject of her art, as though by identifying with the girl she can escape the strictures of being a woman in what Chen Lingyang called "still very much a patriarchal society."[20] To see how gender difference is being defined in twenty-first century China look at women-representations in contemporary art and at who is making them.

[20] Interview by Chiu, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video Art from China*, 177.

Women are. By way of their art, they are thinking and feeling their way through what it is to be a woman in China now, and the art they make has to do with them rather than, as in the west, with how they are regarded by men.

Chen Lingyang spoke for them all when she said: "My works have to do with myself and I am a woman."[21] She is a material woman, where matter is what composes earth and sky, woman and man, and all are subject to generation and decay. The all-composing matter speaks through water and stone, blood and bone, through its motions and its stillness, its music and its silences. We are here deeper than reason and below the level of language. Words come later.

Coda

In the west, beauty has been a member of the triumvirate of intrinsic values: beauty, goodness, and truth. Its appearances or instantiations have been characterized variously as copies of an ideal that exists in a realm untouched by time; manifestations of the mathematically balanced and harmonious relation of the parts of an object or event to the whole; and those things the mere perception of which delights. If there is a value in Chinese aesthetics that plays the role beauty plays in the art and aesthetics of the west, it will be as different from beauty as the conceptual frameworks within which Chinese thought and feeling operate are different from those within which western thoughts and feelings work themselves out. There is no Platonic bifurcation of worlds into the unchanging and the changing; form, in its essence mathematical, is changeless and so is not a channel through which the world's breath flows. The vital spirit of a thing rather than its appearance is of value. And for artist and audience what is of value is their capacity for the stillness and the silence in which the pulse of all things can be taken.

[21] Ibid.

THE SECOND SEX AND CONTEMPORARY CHINESE WOMEN'S ART[1]
A Case Study on Chen Lingyang's Work

He Jinli

Introduction

One of the best academic publishing houses in China, Beijing Sanlian Bookstore, once made a survey of one hundred books that had most influenced Chinese society in the past twenty years (1978-1998); Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was on the list.[2] Everyone knows what 1978-1998 means to China—a period of dramatic changes in Chinese society. However, if one were to do a survey on the history of western feminism in China, one would find that the attention paid to and celebration of Beauvoir in Chinese society is a unique instance, unsurpassed by that of any other feminist of both Europe and the U.S.[3] In this paper, I will demonstrate how exploring this fact not only provides a fresh perspective on the development of Women's Studies in

[1] This paper was presented in an earlier form to the third meeting of Continental and Comparative Philosophy Circle in April 2008 in Honolulu, U.S.A. I would like to express my gratitude to Ralph Weber for his continual help, enlightening critical feedback, and references. Apart from Ralph, a number of people have helped me with the writing of this paper. I particularly appreciate the encouragement and kind help of David Jones and Chen Kuanhong, as well as the comments by participants of the CCPCIII. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Henry Rosemont for patiently listening to my thoughts and encouraging me to write this paper.

[2] http://www.madio.net/Article/Class7/200602/1454.html. *Book Two: Women's Life Today* was first translated into Chinese in 1986 (by Sang Zhu, Nan Shan; Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Chubanshe), and *Book One: Facts and Myths* was translated into Chinese two years later (by Xiao Yi, Zhang Yali, Beijing: Zhongguo Guangbo Chubanshe, 1988), as *The Myths of Women*, *Nüxing de mimi*; the first complete version of the book was published in 1998, translated by Tao Tiezhu, Beijing: Zhongguo Shuji Chubanshe.

[3] One might consider Virginia Woolf and her *A Room of One's Own* (translated into Chinese by Wang Huan in 1989, Beijing: Sanlian Bookstores), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (translated by Wu Qiyun, Ding Zhaomin, Lin Wuwei, Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 1988) and *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Mary Eagleton (translated by Hu Min, Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1989), but they still cannot compare with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

Chinese society, but how it also calls into question the very use of the notion of 'western feminism'[4] for explaining contemporary Chinese women's art. I will use the work of Chen Lingyang as an example to demonstrate the problem.

Feminism vs. Nüquan zhuyi *vs.* Nüxing zhuyi

Min Dongchao, a professor in the School of Social Sciences at Shanghai University who has been working in the field of Women's Studies since the 1980s, in her article "Translation as Crossing Borders: A Case Study of the Translations of the Word 'Feminism' into Chinese by the CSWS (Chinese Society for Women's Studies),"[5] vividly draws a picture of the encounter between western feminism and the Chinese context. This article is not only an example that shows the important role translators play in cross-culture dialogue in the contemporary time of globalization, it also offers some insights for the problems with which this paper is concerned.

During their project of writing and translating into Chinese two books about western feminism and Women's Studies in 1994 and 1997, Min and other colleagues of the U.S.-based Chinese Society for Women's Studies discussed and debated ardently through letters and email the question how to translate the term 'feminism'.

The original translation of 'feminism' when it was introduced into China along with the suffragette movement at the turn of the twentieth century was *nüquan zhuyi* (women's power or rights+ism, Min's translation), "denoting a militant demand for women's political rights reminiscent of the earlier women's suffrage movements in the West and in China."[6] Due to internal political and social changes, feminist knowledge traveled again to China during the 1980s, and 'feminism' received a new translation as *nüxing zhuyi* (femininity+ism, Min's translation), "emphasizing gender differences rather than women's rights, seen in China to have a richer set of cultural and political mean-

[4] With the development of disciplines such as Gender Studies, Women's Studies, Men's Studies and the transformations of Western feminism, it seems that the term 'Western feminism' as denoting a single movement/theory is passing more and more into history. In this article I will adopt a general understanding of Western Feminism in the sense that Min Dongchao and her colleagues emphasize, which will be discussed later in this article.

[5] Min Dongchao (2007).

[6] Ibid.

ings than the earlier term."[7] This translation first circulated in Hong Kong and Taiwan for a while, before it was widely adopted in mainland China in the 1990s.

However, "even though the suggestion made was to use the translation *nüxing zhuyi* for the term 'feminism' in the Index, some contributors preferred the translation *nüquan zhuyi* instead," Min said about the 1994 translation debate. Translators preferring to use *nüquan zhuyi* argued that "feminism in the Western context had been highly political and was in a sense grounded in the concept of 'power'; so, *nüxing zhuyi* does not contain the whole meaning that 'feminism' has in Western terms." However, the opposite opinion emphasized that *nüquan zhuyi* is a branch of *nüxing zhuyi*, and that while the former term contained the political sense, the latter conveyed the idea that women have created a ideological system, including women's political struggles for their rights.[8] Eventually, they democratically voted for ending the 1994 debate and, with only three votes against, they chose *nüxing zhuyi* instead of *nüquan zhuyi* for their 1994 project book, which was published in 1995 by the Sanlian Bookstore.[9]

The debate of the 1997 project on translation of feminist theory in one way was quite similar to the previous one—again justifying the translation of *nüquan zhuyi*, but for a different reason. Some contributors preferred to reuse *nüquan zhuyi* instead of the already prevailing *nüxing zhuyi* to translate the term 'feminism', since they thought that "the historical background should be acknowledged when the term is translated."[10] "… Feminism is an engaged, political enterprise … this should be emphasized in the translation … *nüxing zhuyi* might be too weak for this.'"[11]

There are several insights we can gain from reading between the lines of the debates:

First, all the translators in these two projects are involved in Women's/Chinese Women's Studies and most of them were educated in the U.S. or in Europe. Therefore the debates among the translators are insider debates. The first debate not only shows them as having

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] In the article, Min did not mention the titles of the two books. They should be *Introduction of Western Feminism* (published 1995) and *Selected Translation of the Studies in Social Genders* (published 1998).

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid.

understood the background of western feminism very well, but also as having realized that western feminism as a movement/theory had already become a plural term. The second debate emphasizes the historical background and displays a similar understanding; more importantly, it exhibits a shift from a concern for the western context to a concern for diverse contexts. That is what it means to say that the historical background should be acknowledged when the term is translated. The resolutions they eventually chose are also worthy of mention. The 1994 project agreed to use *nüxing zhuyi*, while 1997 translators decided themselves which of the two they preferred to use. While in both cases a democratic decision was heeded, the first leans more toward acceptance (western theory 'export strategy'), and the second more toward respecting diversity (of the readers, the translators and cultures).

Second, whether it is for gaining readers in the first instance or for showing respect to cultural differences in the second, the prevailing use of *nüxing zhuyi* (as Min mentioned in this article, at times the use of *nüxing zhuyi* was a requirement set by Chinese editors) in Chinese society shows that it has something to do with the specific cultural background. The concerns motivating some translators to speak out against using *nüxing zhuyi*, that it might be too weak for feminism and carries the risk of an essentialist feminism,[12] show a strong sense of extending the enterprise of western feminism to the Chinese context. It is proper to say that only scholars who are familiar with both of the contexts would be sensitive enough to raise those questions. Compared with the western-based CSWS translators, most Women's Studies scholars in China are much less sensitive to the history of western feminism, if they take notice of it at all. The prevailing use of *nüxing zhuyi* in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China partly has to do with their cultural experience that made them feel that *nüquan zhuyi* was too strong or aggressive for the Chinese context and could be understood as offensive to the harmony that the Chinese community always values most.

I also want to mention briefly Min's other article "Awakening again: Travelling feminism in China in the 1980s",[13] which was published in the Women's Studies International Forum, 2005. In this article, Min Dongchao used Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a point of departure to

[12] Ibid.

[13] Min Dongchao (28[2005], 274-288).

trace the form in which feminism was received, understood and localized during the 1980s.[14] Min, who started Women's Studies as a career in the 1980s, and then spent another twenty years in both the U.K. (1992-2002) and the U.S. (2003) before she came back to teach in China, is one of the pioneers of Women's Studies in China. Her intensive field studies and interviews with some of the leading Chinese Women's Studies scholars, who were involved in the transnational feminist movement during the 1980s, shows two things: on the one hand, Chinese Women's Studies were indeed influenced by western feminism; on the other hand, she and her colleagues found it hard to establish a systematic study, or, to use her words, a 'theorizing', in the Chinese context. Why so?

The particular reason for the enthusiastic acceptance of *The Second Sex* among the common people, stated by these leading Chinese Women scholars, probably will surprise many readers: "For Chinese mass readers, the influence of this book is not its content, but its title. The earliest published copy in mainland China came from Taiwan. The translator of the book had changed the title to *Woman (nüren)—the Second Sex*….The word 'woman' (*nüren*) appeared impressive. It was like a challenge to our society, in which woman had gotten lost in 'men and women are the same'."[15] And another Chinese writer observes: "What readers see is sex and not feminism … My feeling is that Chinese people are quite ignorant about things going on in Western post-industrial societies, things like homosexuality and feminism."[16]

Min herself is representative of this reception: "When I read *The Second Sex* in the late 1980s, I was already involved in the newly developing Women's Studies. It was the first Western feminist book I was able to read … I was fascinated by Beauvoir's feminist ideas as well as her lifestyle … For me, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was less important than her autobiographies, and her feminism was less a set of ideas which are part of a political movement than [it] was a guide to living."[17]

The fact that the completed translation of the book was not published in China until more than ten years later (see note 2) also shows

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

the random or context-based acceptance and the difficulty of 'theorizing theory'.

Putting all of this together, we can now draw some conclusions: While Min and her colleagues at the CSWS try to theorize Chinese Women's theory in order to develop Chinese Women's study as a discipline and movement, scholars in Chinese institutions who do not share this background are not quite as receptive to western feminism to fulfill the role of "a theory and practice aimed at ending the subjection of women to men."[18]

From the beginning of the 20th century, the history of Chinese awakening and borrowing from western culture suggests an emphasis on practicality rather than systematicity: that is, the borrowing is neither for the sake of understanding the other culture, nor in order to import a whole system, but rather for the sake of China. Viewed in the broader context of Chinese acceptance of western feminist theories, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a unique case; but viewed from the overall Chinese history of westernization, *The Second Sex* is just another familiar case.[19] At most we can say it is practical westernization, but more correctly, perhaps, it is fractal (fragmented) westernization. Therefore, trying to theorize western (or borrowed) theories is a difficult task in the Chinese context.

My point here is that the practice of fragmented borrowing is not itself problematic at all, as some such similar thing occurs in many so-called 'culture import' experiences. But if one believes that that is all it means and applies it to a discourse, this fragmented borrowing will make the object even more fragmented. With the difficulty of theorizing western feminist theories in the Chinese context and the fact that western feminism was introduced into China in 1980s together with various western philosophical, ideological, literary theories, (i.e. feminism movement/theory was just one of them),[20] "the dichotomy between Europeans and Americans as theory makers and Chinese women as objects of theory"[21] created problems in com-

[18] Ibid

[19] There are numerous examples: Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Kang Youwei's (1858-1927) social, political and education reformations; Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) adopted Kant; Wang Guowei (1887-1927) applied Schopenhauer's pessimism to Chinese Literature, etc.

[20] For a better understanding of the acceptance of Western Feminism in the Chinese context and Chinese Women's experiences, see Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, Tyrene White (1994).

[21] Gilmartin et al. (1994, 7).

parative culture studies. As the editors of a volume on *Engendering China* write:

> Placed in the context of a universalist feminist agenda, the problems Chinese women face are often attributed to difference that seem unalterably "other" to the West. Here the West remains the unmarked standard against which difference is measured. The subordination of Chinese women, for example, is explained by reference to overarching frameworks of 'socialism' or 'Chinese culture' without sufficient recognition of the historically contingent quality of these broad categories. Too often Chinese women come up short when compared to women living in the west. They are made to seem not only oppressed but unaware of the true nature of their oppression.[22]

It might be that the so-called 'unawareness' of Chinese women partly derives from the fact that the rapid political and social dramatic changes taking place in China in this one hundred years have not given women enough time to reflect upon their full situation in society. Another reason I should mention is that western-educated Chinese feminists often appear more radical than their contemporary western counterparts since they are quite aware of the difficult mission of western feminism to bring change to Chinese society.[23] However, the muted continues to be muted in the discourse of speaking for the silenced.

Philosophical Background

Although Chinese women and western women share many historical, social and political experiences such as living in a male-dominated society where some of them have struggled to gain equal rights, I believe that Chinese women do view these experiences in a different way, for reasons having to do with traditional culture. Surely, further efforts are needed by both, women and men, particularly an ever more penetrating self-awareness as regards questions of gender. In what follows, I proffer a discussion of how different philosophical and tradi-

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[22] Gilmartin et al. (1994, 6).

[23] See the impressive dialogues between Chenyang Li and the other two scholars who criticize his 1994, article "The Confucian concept of *jen* and the feminist ethics of care: A comparative study". While Li made an interesting and modest comparison, Yuan's strong feminist sensitivity makes her argument overtly radical, especially to Confucianism. Also See Yuan (2002) and Li (2002).

tional backgrounds make western and Chinese women look at things differently. My aim is to contribute to both our understanding of gender as well as of culture in the hope that both perspectives might be mutually enriching.

I continue to use *The Second Sex* as a western example in this comparison, knowing that the work is not representative for western feminism as such and may be seen as somewhat dated.[24] Because of Beauvoir's unique role in the Chinese context, however, her work provides a convenient point of departure for examining the different philosophical and traditional backgrounds at work. Furthermore, the insufficiency of using *The Second Sex* to explain Chinese Women's Art will become amply clear.

In many aspects, Simone de Beauvoir makes significant steps towards confronting the woman problem. She starts from pointing out the failure of the feminist movement since the 19th century—the proponents of which, having tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man, only made women questions in the arrogant masculine world look trivial, so that it simply turned out to be a quarrel, and "when quarreling, one no longer reasons well."[25] Therefore, in Beauvoir's view, they basically "have done little to illuminate the problem."[26]

Since the simple fact of biology is not enough to provide answers,[27] Beauvoir advocates tracing back the course of history to study women

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[24] I'm aware that after Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, especially in the context of globalization, one should be very careful with categories. For example, it will be very dangerous to use dualisms to generalize Western thinking. The same problem I face when I try to deal with Chinese sensibilities. Since the end of the 19th century, Chinese thinking changed a lot, not least because of modernization, that is, because of the encounter of Chinese culture with Western culture. Western culture opened new vistas to Chinese intellectuals and problematized tradition, causing endless debates in China. Can one still be confident to use traditional culture as explanatory for modern or contemporary Chinese or Western society? Globalization does raise the problem of locality and makes it more difficult to define or generalize: what exactly do ideas such as Chineseness, Westernness, Americanness, Europeanness, Africanness, etc, mean? Despite the many difficulties, there is something positive to it, especially for our study of comparative philosophies or cultures, for it helps us not to use incautiously simplifying frames such as East vs. West, but asks for more discussion and communication, more flexibility, and more appreciation for perspectivism and diversity.

[25] Simone de Beauvoir (1974, xxxi).

[26] Ibid, xv.

[27] Ibid, 41.

from an existential perspective with due regard to their total situation. She famously claims, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[28]

The idea of the other is used to describe women's real situation—for her, the great achievements of our contemporary world, from Freud's psychoanalytic theories to Engels's historical materialism, all confirm that women are just the men-made Other, although, as she writes, Freud has his limits:

> Freud assumes that a woman feels that she is a mutilated man, based upon a masculine model … Many psychoanalysts today admit that a young girl may regret not having a penis without believing, however, that it has been removed from her body … many little girls, in fact, are late in discovering the masculine construction … The little boy obtains from his penis a living experience that makes it an object of pride to him, but this pride does not necessarily imply a corresponding humiliation for his sisters … The little girl's covetousness, when it exists, results from a previous evaluation of virility. Freud takes this for granted, when it should be accounted for … The sovereignty of the father is a fact of social origin, which Freud fails to account for.[29]

Beauvoir further writes:

> A psychoanalyst will interpret all social claims of woman as phenomena of the 'masculine protest', for the Marxist, on the contrary, her sexuality only expresses her economic situation in a more or less complex, roundabout fashion. But the categories of 'clitorid' and 'vaginal', like the categories of 'bourgeois' or 'proletarian', are equally inadequate to encompass a concrete woman.[30]

Beauvoir's point of view of the existential situation of women is this western existential context, about which she writes:

> The virtue of Freudianism derives from the fact that the existent is a body: what he experiences as a body confronted by other bodies expresses his existential situation concretely. Similarly, what is true in the Marxian thesis is that the ontological aspirations—the projects for becoming—of the existent take concrete form according to the material possibilities offered, especially those opened up by technological advances. But unless they are integrated into the totality of human reality, sexuality and technology alone can explain nothing. That is why in Freud the prohibitions of the superego and the drives of the ego appear to be contingent, and why in Engels's account of the history of the family the most important developments seem to arise according to the caprices

[28] Ibid, 301.
[29] Ibid, 46-7.
[30] Ibid, 66.

> of mysterious fortune. In our attempt to discover woman … we shall hold that the body, the sexual life, and the resources of technology exist concretely for man only in so far as he grasps them in the total perspective of his existence. The value of muscular strength, of the phallus, of the tool can be defined only in a world of values; it is determined by the basic project through which the existent seeks transcendence.[31]

First, let us look at the idea of transcendence, which is ubiquitous in Beauvoir's book and is one of the most basic projects for humanity in the western context. Transcendence is an idea that connotes independence, a fundamental independence of a strictly transcendent being or principle. Dualism is the idea that purports to describe those categories necessary to relate to such a transcendent world. The sense of transcendence is to admit the existence of the transcendent. And only the transcendent creates, commands, or builds rules toward a world independent of itself. That is the ultimate ruler.

My point here is that Beauvoir views the world not unlike all the western male thinkers she criticizes in her book, that is, in terms of dichotomies: transcendence/immanence, subject/object, One (I)/the Other, essential/inessential, inferiority/superiority, autonomy/passivity. These dualisms play a major role in her descriptions. She writes: "[woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."[32]

Even the ideal woman exists only to satisfy the man's dream of the Other: "the woman as a mystery is only for the man"; though "intended to be objective, [she] is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege"[33]; "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the Other, the inessential, the object."[34]

My understanding of Beauvoir's effort-consuming persuasion of fighting back to change the existential wrongness for women in terms of transcendence is that it should be an endless battle between man and woman, since the whole conversation is still drawing on the traditional western dualism. It is here where her views of nature, mother-

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[31] Ibid, 67.
[32] Ibid, xix.
[33] Ibid, xix, fn. 8.
[34] Ibid, xx.

hood and creativity are very different from those underlying Chinese cultural sensibilities. Let us shortly consider these categories in both western and Chinese culture one after the other.

For example, when we say, in the traditional western context, that women are considered as closer to nature, we easily have the nature/culture dualism in mind. Nature is for man simply there to be conquered. To achieve humanity means to transcend nature for the sake of culture. Nature remains an object. No trans(or inter)-subjectivity is established. Moreover, for Beauvoir, the whole evolution of women's situation is to be explained by both their involvement in industrial production and their freedom from the slavery of reproduction—the conjunction of these factors inevitably transformed their social and political status as victims of motherhood, the nature of women. Creativity, as related to the idea of transcendence, in a male-dominated society, only belongs to man; woman is doomed to be in a position of reproduction which is then understood as the disadvantage for women to achieve transcendence.[35]

All these concepts are read quite differently in the Chinese context. Nature and human beings form a trans(inter)-subjectivity where one not only appreciates nature and feels close to it, but where one actually *is* nature. "The way of the world is one, being with the human is the way of humanity, being with *tian* (nature) is the way of *tian*."[36] Numerous texts of both Daoism and Confucianism explain the wholeness of Nature and Humanity. Not to mention the Daoist Zhuangzi's (about 369-286 BC) famous "On the Equality of Things" and the concept of "Great Transformation"[37] between the butterfly and himself. Also, numerous instances of Chinese poetry express the same idea—nature is not an object we should appreciate or conquer, it is dear to us. As Tang Poet Li Bai (701-762) describes this relationship in a poem: "Jingting Mountain and me, we are never tired of appreciating each other."[38] But a difference is also manifest in the fact that Chinese would hardly view motherhood as a disadvantage for women; on the contrary, motherhood has been much eulogized, as exemplified by Nü Wa, the legendary mother of Chinese history who created man and

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[35] Beauvior (1974), passim.

[36] Cheng Hao (1033-1107), *Posthumous Writing of Master Cheng*, Vol. 18, my translation.

[37] For the concept of "Great Transformation", See, *Zhuangzhi*, Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

[38] *Sitting alone on Jingting Mountain*, *The completed work of Libai*, vol.21

woman in her own image. In Daoism, self-realization means returning, returning to one's childhood and to the 'female gate':

> The life-force of the valley never dies—
> This is called the dark female.
> The gateway of the dark female—
> This is called the root of the world. (Laozi Chapter 6)[39]

It would not be farfetched to claim that in China there is a tradition of worshipping motherhood, that is, the world created. As it reads in the first chapter of the *Daodejing*: "The nameless is the fetal beginnings of everything that is happening; while that which is named is their mother." Therefore, in the Chinese context, there is no distinction between creativity and reproduction, and creativity is hence not superior to, or prior to, reproduction. Rather, the appropriate metaphor would be that of co-creativity (of *yin* and *yang*, human and nature, male and female).

Therefore, the first question raised from within a Chinese cultural sensibility might be, 'Is it necessary that the Other is supposed to be the enemy, the victim, the subordinate?'

Zhuangzi can offer an answer:

> What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It. There they say 'That's it, that's not' from one point of view, here we say 'That's it, that's not' from another point of view. Are there really It and Other? Or really no It and Other? Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way. When once the axis is found at the centre of the circle there is no limit to responding with either, on the one hand no limit to what is *it*, on the other no limit to what is not.[40]

Here is another quote from Zhuangzi:

> Allowable?—allowable. Unallowable?—unallowable. The Way comes about as we walk it; as for a thing, call it something and that's so. Why so? By being so. Why not so? By not being so. It is inherent in a thing that from somewhere that's so of it, from somewhere that's allowable of it; of no thing is it not so, of no thing is it unallowable….the Way interchanges them and deems them one. Their dividing is formation, their formation is dissolution; all things whether forming or dissolving in reverting interchange and are deemed to be one.[41]

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[39] Ames and Hall (2003), 85.
[40] A. C. Graham (1981), 53.
[41] Ibid.

In the face of these quotes, we might immediately think of the idea of the circulation and natural balance of *yin* and *yang*, the great transformation of everything that is happening (*wanwu*) in Daoism or in similar correlative cosmologies, as, for example, Roger Ames and David Hall have described a focus-field sensibility in Confucianism.[42]

In the western context, creativity implies having the power (German, *Macht*) that is necessary to create (*machen*) the things of existence; it is the unified force that forms worlds and makes other forces possible. I can see this sense in Beauvoir's interpretation of motherhood. It is difficult to find an equivalent idea in the Chinese context, because Chinese culture emphasizes co-creativity.[43] In addition to Zhuangzi, I would also like to use Zarathrustra as metaphor to describe the differences between the two cultures: the battle for Western women is just like Zarathustra's ceaseless heart—tragedy, suffering, and fighting are essential for transcendence.

From my point of view, if you look at western feminism and how its diverse theories developed, it is not difficult to see strong tensions. On the one hand, every step shows a further and wider understanding of women's conditions and opens new windows; on the other hand, the achievements on the 'battlefield' continue the spirit of second wave feminism. While black feminism in Northern America seeks to assert its space by attacking the white-middle class's domination, third-world feminism targets the developed western world to make their voice be heard. Liberal feminism fights the generalization of women as a group struggling for individual rights while multiracial feminism emphasizes the role of different ethnic groups and opposes an assumed female ethic. Only the feminist ethics of care appears to be an exception, upholding "the power of feelings."[44] However, the feminist ethics of care itself essentializes women and thereby puts women in a position which men can take advantage of, destroying the achievements gained by women. A novel theory is built by fighting or attacking another; the tension cannot be easily loosened in this one/other framework. However, I should say, I have no intention to fundamentalize or essentialize western feminist movements/theories. Sometimes I

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[42] See Ames and Hall (2003) for the discussion of *Daoist Correlative Cosmology*; Hall and Ames (1987), 237-46 and Ames(1993) for a discussion of the 'focus-field' sensibility.

[43] See Ames and Hall (2001) for a detailed explanation of the concept 'co-creativity'.

[44] Nancy Chodorow (1999).

would think that this passion for radical change/departure in the western tradition really has advantages, for example, when trying to reach a short-term goal, just like the belief in laws and principles makes a community a more law/principle-dominated society. This reminds me of the opposite way which Confucius chooses. When talking about governing and improving social order, he says:

> Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishment but be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves (*Analects*, 2.3).[45]

Probably the Chinese context makes Chinese women less deconstructive, more constructive when they face problems. I guess that could explain why the Chinese women are more comfortable with *nüxing zhuyi*, instead of *nüquan zhuyi*. Chinese *nüxing* feminists realize that the differences between male and female *exist* and are to that extent *necessary*. Empowering women cannot be a game of winning power, rather, it is an enterprise of learning how best to work together in particular circumstances, without undue concern for theories and principles.

Case Study: A Snapshot of Contemporary Chinese Women's Art Female Bodies, Different Expressions

The aim of this last part is simply and directly to show how insufficient western feminism is to interpret and assess contemporary Chinese women's art. Chinese women's art has received increasing international attention since the 1990s. More and more exhibitions have been held both in China and abroad—solo exhibitions, group exhibitions and international exhibitions.[46] There are numerous articles employing western feminism as the standard to criticize Chinese art or refer-

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[45] Rosemont and Ames (2008). For the philosophical interpretation of the differences between Western sensibility and Chinese sensibility, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames (1987), Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (2001, 2003), Tu, Weiming (1976,1981), Rosemont (2001), etc. See also the comparison between *Jen* Ethics and Western Feminist Ethics of Care, Chenyang, Li (2000); Rosemont(1997).

[46] To name just a few exhibitions inside of China: *Female Artists' world* (I,1990, II,1995, III,2000, Beijing); *Century, Women* (1998, Beijing); *Women Declaration: Contemporary Women Artists' Exhibition* (2004, Shanghai) *SHE: Ten Female Artists' Works*, (2004, Beijing), *Dream, Dilemma, Modern Feminine Nature* (2004, Beijing),

ring to western feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, Miriam Schapiro, Cindy Sherman, Mary Kelly, Jenny Holzer, etc. with whom to compare the self-awakening of Chinese women artists. For example, after a detailed description of the spirit of western feminist artists, Ma Qianru in her article "Female Art (*Nüxing Yishu*): Wish You to Be Independent and Strong—Contemporary Women Art Market From the Point of Western Feminism Perspective" concludes that "compared to Western female artists, Chinese female artists have not yet established their aesthetic world and the context of creativity."[47]

After the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing on September 4, 1995, a series of women artists' exhibitions and seminars took place, and in 1998, the first comprehensive women's art event *Century, Women* was organized by the Society of the Art and Culture of Women in the Center of Comparative Art at the Art Academy of China. More than twenty art critics attended the exhibition to discuss women's art. For the critic Zhou Xiaoru, although this event was successful and received much public attention, from the perspective of China's patriarchal system, women's art is doomed as there is actually no soil in which *nüxing*[48] art can grow.[49] In his article, "Is There Soil for *Nüxing Yishu* to Grow," Zhou blames the slow devel-

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Between Liberation and Bondage (2005, Beijing); *Combination: Female Artists' Exhibition* (2006, Beijing) [titles are all my translations].

[47] Ma Qianru (2007), my translation.

[48] The articles I cited, all without exception, use *nüxing, nüxing zhuyi, nüxing yishu or nüxing zhuyi yishu* to refer to Western feminist art or artists. Therefore, when they talk about Chinese women's art, it is thought to have the same meaning. In my translation, especially as to the Chinese context, I still use 'women's art' or sometimes 'female art' to translate nüxing yishu, although those Chinese words always refer to the supposed standard—Western feminist art. Not to be misleading, there is no Chinese sample for '(Western) feminist art' nor do Chinese have their own feminist art which can easily be compared to Western feminist art. Some scholars probably think so. There is, however, no such equivalent in Chinese context for Western feminist art, and vice versa, no equivalent for *nüxing yishu* in the Western context. As discussed above, the prevailing acceptance of *nüxing yishu* for 'Western feminist art' has something to do with the cultural and social background, and the meaning is being transformed in the Chinese context. Therefore, when *nüxing zhuyi*, *nüxing yishu* or *nüxing zhuyi yishu* refers to the Western context, I translate it back in its original usage as 'Western Feminism', 'Western Feminist art'; when I take them to be talking about Chinese women's art, especially with the case '*nüxing yishu*' in mind, although being the same phrase, I translate it as 'women art' or 'Chinese women's art'. I take it that there is no bias imposed on the concepts male/female, man/woman (in Chinese, *nanxing/nüxing*, *nanren/nüren*) in a sex/gender system, before the imposition of a patriarchal social system. I will come back to this topic later in my conclusion.

[49] Zhou Xiaoru (1993).

opment of contemporary women's art on China's traditional agricultural life style and the patriarchal society that emerged from China's feudal economy. Critics such as Ma and Zhou start from talking about the influence of western feminism (particularly Beauvoir), measuring the maturity of Chinese women's art on that western standard and find China's women's art falling short of the western feminist standard.

I will now compare Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971) and Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) (Figure 28) with the Chinese artist Chen Lingyang's *Scroll* (October 1999) and *Twelve Flower Months for the Third Month Peach* (1999-2000) (Figure 29) to show the difference between western feminist art and Chinese *nüxing* art. Like Chicago and Schneemann, Chen depicts the female body—in particular, the genitalia and menses—as aesthetic object. In her article "Female Body: True and Beautiful—Chen Lingyang's *Twelve Flower Months* and Women's Self-Consciousness," Liao Wen relates Chen's work to Chicago and Schneemann, reading them as representing one and the same female body. She argues that the works are united in confronting the truth of the female body. The works destroy the exoticization of the female scent (the scent of a woman), whose beauty is the object of the male gaze and consumption, using the most true things—genitalia, menstrual blood—which have been taboo in traditional art, to show the real form of a woman's true body. From this perspective, she concluded that "Chen uses the superficial traditional art form to form tradition, and the actual 'female scent' to destroy the '(traditional) female scent': "Those 'new new' generation girls who were born in 1970 … growing up in a relatively open-minded social environment, and a gradually internationalizing age of information … inspire us with the self-consciousness and earnestness of their '*nüxing*' expression!"[50]

However, my understanding of this work is quite different from this standard reading. Although the three artists all use the female personal, everyday functions to create their works, they express different feelings and meanings. I do not need to repeat the strong feminist sense Chicago and Schneemann put in their works; since most western readers are very familiar with their works, I will concentrate on Chen's work.

[50] Liao Wen (2001), my translation.

Chen Lingyang was born in 1975 in Zhejiang and has been living and working in Beijing since she graduated from the China Central Academy of Art in 1999. In her work *Scroll*, she mounted toilet paper dabbed with menses as a scroll painting; from a distance, it looks just like a beautiful freehand brushwork in a traditional style. When I showed the picture of this work to my students, nobody realized that it had been produced with menstrual blood on toilet paper, as it appears in the form of ink on paper. The material she used is specific to Chinese art history; the juxtaposition of menses with traditional art forms could be a revolutionary gesture. But if we compare her work with Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, the traditional form of the scroll becomes prominent; it makes the work even more impressive, yet gentle and soft, deconstructing a simple feminist interpretation. At first, the image appears to be a traditional landscape scroll; only when seen in close-up does the viewer realize that the image is painted with the artist's menstrual blood. This juxtaposition—of the 'culture' traditional Chinese painting with the 'nature' of the female body—makes a profound impression.

The *Twelve Flower Months* was created from November 1999 to December 2000 right after *Scroll* (October, 1999). *Twelve Flower Months* is a series of twelve photographs, juxtaposing annuals (blossoms) with mirror images of genitalia during menstruation. After graduating from art school, Chen Lingyang lived in isolation. She did not have any work, seldom contacted friends, and lost or cut connections with public life for several months. "In that situation, the physical aspects of my identity became prominent: hunger, cold, and especially menstruation, and menstrual pain, emotional turbulence, and so on. I became aware of the cycles of day and night, the slow growth of plants and the changing patterns of the weather …"[51] This emotional experience inspired her to create *Twelve Flower Months*, a real work about menstruation. The work took twelve months and consists of hand-made enlarged color photos. Each picture uses the perennial blossom of that month, each with the mirror of a different classical shape, reflecting the genitalia and menstrual blood of her own body; the borders of the photographs imitate the shapes of the windows and door of traditional Chinese gardens; the flowers shown in each photograph are the blossoms of each month of the traditional Chinese calendar: January *narcissus*; February *magnolia*, March,

[51] Chen Lingyang (2003).

peach; April *peony*; May *megranate*; June *lotus*; July *orchid*; August *sweet osmanthus*, September *chrysanthemum*, October *euphorbia*, November *camellia*, December *calyx canthus.* Drawn from her year of self-imposed exile, *Twelve Flower Months* is extraordinarily private and self-reflective, while at the same time expressive of Chen's effort to emerge from isolation and to establish an intimate connection with the world.

The menstrual blood in this work reflects woman's nature, echoing the nature of cosmos, so close to the flowers as the most beautiful symbol of nature. Usually we use a mirror or self-portrait to express some kind of privacy. But in this work, the mirrors and self-portraits draws the viewer into the image. The classical shapes of the mirror and the light and the different shapes of the borders of the photographs and even the placement of the flowers has a cultural resonance. The open blossom and the opened body in the reflected mirror and the gaze of the camera all emphasize the meaning of openness. All these connections and connotations create a continuity of nature and culture; it is inclusive instead of exclusive.

It is worth quoting the artist's own interpretation of her work here. Chen Lingyang composed a self-interview between Chen Lingyang No. 2 (C2) and herself (C1):

C2: Your work (*Twelve Flower Months*) seems to have a very strong emotional expression.
C1: Yeah. But I don't want to explain this. I want to leave the space of interpretation to the viewers. Of course, I'm happy to hear the opinions and discussions from the others' own perspectives.
C2: Some people say that your work expresses privacy. When a private work is exhibited in a public space, it is hard to anticipate, or in another words, to control the consequences…
C1. In some sense, it is aimed to have an impact upon the public space.

Let me start from the background of this work. We are all familiar with the idea of *Tianren Heyi* (the oneness of *tian* [nature] and the human) in traditional Chinese culture. It is said that the utmost self-cultivated person achieves the feeling of oneness with the *cosmos* and the *ten thousand things*; she totally loses herself in the mysterious aesthetic world, loses all human feelings, such as joy, anger, sorrow, pleasure, right, wrong, good or evil. *Tian* is the rhythm of the cosmos (come back and go, round, round again); women can feel this cosmic

rhythm from her monthly physical (consequently, psychological) changes.

> When people view this work in a public space, they may have various opinions. However, the work itself also offers the possibility to deconstruct those interpretations. The traditional allusions make this deconstruction possible. Engendering and deconstructing, like the cycles of *Tian*.
> It is this relation of constructing and deconstructing that gives birth to new possibilities.[52]

C2. I notice that the duration of *Twelve Flower Months* is one year and it includes twelve photographs. You seem to give prominence to this.
C1. Yes. The twelve photographs appear together as a completed work. Just as I mentioned above, this work is related to the pattern and rhythm of the circulation of things. A year is a completely basic palingenesis of time. Where is the beginning and where is the ending actually doesn't matter, it just goes round and round, but each moment is unrepeatable. In a word, apparently it is a year, but actually it is an infinite time conception.

Unlike in western art, nudity, the naked body, never appeared in traditional Chinese art history. As the body is the symbol of primacy, it makes perfect sense to see contemporary Chinese artists using the body to express that repression and they do get attention for it. But it is the same case with Chinese male artists. Indeed, I do not exclude a feminist interpretation. It does have its insights, but it cannot exhaust the rich meaning of this work. I believe that my quotation of Chen Lingyang justifies my understanding of her work—the cultural background plays an even more important role, and the inter-expression of nature and culture is well expressed in her work. Li Xianting,[53] In the preface he wrote for *Twelve Flower Months* exhibition and in response to Liao's interpretation of Chen's work,[54] observes: "*Twelve Flower Months* shows the artist's concern for women's identity, it

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[52] Chen Lingyang (2001), my translation.

[53] Li Xianting's contribution to the development of contemporary Chinese art is great, especially when it has been a struggle for survival in the new art market system instead of the national political system after the opening policy. This has been well recognized by the Chinese art academic world. For the detail of the historical, social, political background of contemporary Chinese art, please see Gao Minglu(1998, 2001) and Wu Hong(1999).

[54] Li Xianting actually invited Liao to write this article (See Li[2001]) and it has become quite an 'authoritative' interpretation of Chen's work. Liao repeated her idea in another article which summarizes female art (*nüxing yishu*) since 1990s (Liao[2004]).

doesn't give you the impression that it is just another western feminist imposed art work or tagged by the idea … it shows the natural connection between Chinese cosmology and women's natural aspects … Moreover, the construction of the pictures has the traditional window designs in the gardens of south China near her home."[55]

We are not determined by our biological construction; we are more built by our society and culture. In many ways, our body actually expresses those backgrounds. As many western feminists have pointed out, the patriarchal society constructed the image of women and women's beauty. When women artists are showing their bodies in a public space, they are giving statements. Judy Chicago was born Judy Cohen and her gesture to change her name to the place she was born is her statement. This is such a determined rupture with the male blood relationship that cannot be tolerated. Her gesture can be interpreted as her being ashamed of this relationship, because it was a stigma of woman's identity, a stigma of women's enslavement; if she could choose she would prefer not to be given birth by man.

I would like to introduce another of Chen's work, *The 25th hour*, to make this contrast deeper. While the interpretation of privacy and openness, the oneness of nature and culture informed *Twelve Flower Months*, *The 25th hour* can be read as women's dialogue and communication with the real world. Yet there is continuity between the two works, especially concerning Chinese women's sensibilities. *The 25th hour* was created in 2002 and is a digital photograph. A giant woman kneels down and covers her face on a top of a dark warehouse; around her are the night sky and many industrialized city buildings. In the introduction to this work, Chen says,

> This 'giantess' is not really very brave, and so she will only freely change her size and make these kinds of gestures when the clock strikes 25:00. Very often, the real world and the male world get mixed up in my mind. They both come from outside me; they both exist very forcefully, with initiative power and aggression. Facing these two worlds, I often feel that I am weak and helpless, and don't know what to do. But just being alive means that I cannot avoid them, not even for one day. I wish that every day there could be a certain time like 25:00, when I could become as large as I like, and do whatever I want.[56]

[55] Li Xianting (2001), my translation.
[56] Chen Lingyang (2002).

The kneeling giant Chinese woman: she is so different from her western sister who stands up, right on the center of the stage, with her powerful body to show the equal strength, equal height, everything a patriarchal society takes to be power. She wakes up, stands there, her vagina makes the same statement with the same language that the penis has spoken for thousands of years. That is a stage, just like it has been, only for monologues; it is just too powerful to arouse dialogues or a multi-logues. But this giant woman, she kneels down under the twilight sky, the steel-concrete construction forest, which is much more powerful, more 'giant' than she is. There is no central stage; the stage for her is so unstable, so dangerous, as she kneels down and bends her whole naked body, taking the risk of being down, taking the risk of being taken advantage of, taking the risk of losing hope. She waits there, covers her head and her eyes; she seems totally to relinquish her rights to you. Is she really certain you will come, open her hands, hold her head, touch her hair and show your concern? We do not know. But she opens herself in front of you, a gesture inviting dialogue. And then you will know, she is as 'giant' as you. She relinquishes her rights to you, and is immense yet yielding.

Conclusion

Our body that is embodied in the sex/gender system is culturally determined. We see clearly from the discussion of the art works above that although Chen Lingyang, Judy Chicago, and Carolee Schneemann all represent female bodies, their representations express different conceptions of the feminine.

Viewed from a western feminist perspective, this is too bizarre, too weird a gesture, to depict the menses as traditional art, the genitalia in classical mirrors, the body of the female giant. But these images express the Chinese artist's awareness of reality. Instead of choosing to reject reality, she tries to negotiate with patriarchal society: the 25th hour is not only a chance for women's freedom; it is also a chance for man, for the awakening of self-consciousness on both sides!

Viewed from the patriarchal perspective, this gesture threatens to destroy the enterprise of women's equality. But this is not what I am concerned about here. My concern is that this difference could well explain the question we raised at the very beginning. The Chinese woman not only relies on the inter-subjectivity and inter-transforma-

tion of yin/yang, nature/culture; she is also very well aware of the power of weakness. Of course, we could say that this power of weakness while eulogized in the *Daodejing* may actually cause "a patriarchal appropriation of the feminine images and values … as the definition of femininity (*nüxing*, my note)."[57] However, the positive reading of this weakness characteristic of women still plays a role in women's self-understanding and self-consciousness:

> The softest things in the world ride roughshod over the hardest things … Rare are those in the world who reach an understanding of the benefits of teachings that go beyond what can be said, and of doing things noncoercively (*wuwei*). (Chapter 43).[58]
> Things that are hard and rigid are the companions of death;
> Things that are supple and soft are the companions of life.
> For this reason,
> If a weapon is rigid it will not prevail;
> If a tree is rigid and great dwell below,
> While the supple and soft abide above.[59] (Chapter 78)

The western patriarchal sex/gender system indicates that women's subordination and the sex/gender system under dichotomizing categories are historical rather than natural and thus can be changed as history progresses. Therefore, under a linear historical worldview, all the historically, culturally constructed gender biased language may be transformed into a gender-neutral language. This is a powerful gesture to show that we believe that the world should be changed. At the same time, the body expresses a powerful language of its own, embedded with engendered meanings.

The inter-transformation of *yin/yang*, the oneness of *tian* (nature) and humanity, and the weakness dialectic of the *Daodejing*, plus the ubiquity of ideas such as *zhong* (忠) (giving of oneself fully; doing one's best as one's authentic self) and *shu* (恕) (*deference*), all express the unifying thread of the *dao* of Confucius,[60] that is indicated by a co-related cosmology to hold the sense of togetherness and communication in Chinese community. Therefore, *nüxing* in the Chinese context indicates that the culturalized biological body determines sex

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[57] Judith Chuan Xu (2003).
[58] Ames and Hall (2003), 144-5.
[59] Ibid, 197.
[60] See Hall and Ames (1987) (Chapter V), for a detailed interpretation and explanation of the main ideas and the centrality of communication in classical Confucian thinking.

differences, sex identities, gender roles, femininity and masculinity. However, the body should not be employed to support the patriarchal subordination of women. In this sense, *nüxing* is the ground to achieve a social identity as it is the first identity women have. Western feminism by itself is insufficient to convey the revolutionary meaning of *nüxing zhuyi* because *nüxing zhuyi* is already very revolutionary. It connotes an unconscious acknowledgement that biological and cultural characteristics construct women's experience. The absence of an oppositional dialectic and implicit rejection of western feminism also expresses the same culture unconscious underlying *nüxing zhuyi*.

Culturally defined gender characteristics for women, resulting in patriarchal prejudice against women, have influenced the biological understanding of sex/gender. However, although the Chinese *nüxing* and its western equivalent share many similar experiences in a patriarchal society, the weakness dialectic and oneness culturally imbued in the sensibility of Chinese women distinguishes *nüxing* from western feminist ideals of women. *Nüxing* expresses their joy and their sorrow, their failure or their success in this still patriarchal world.

I hope the Chinese *nüxing* won't wait too long to enjoy the 25th hour—the time that is not really existent in the everyday life. Miracles happen only when the other in the dialogue can be sensitive enough to appreciate this sentimental, subtle message. Women have yearned for this response for such a long time!

EXPRESSION EXTREME AND HISTORY TRAUMA IN WOMEN BODY ART IN CHINA: THE CASE OF HE CHENGYAO

Eva Kit Wah Man

This study is inspired by Amelia Jones' arguments for a body art that focuses on its development in the late capitalist, postmodern, and postcolonial western world.[1] Her conclusions are that body art practices are performative, enacting subjects in passionate and convulsive relationships and aiming at dislocating the effects of social and private experience. She argues that these practices, desirous and erotic in nature, participate in the subversion of formalism in art.[2] This study, while not aiming at a description of how modernism and formalism are subverted through body art, coincides with most of Jones's intention to highlight the position of the body as locus of a disintegrated or dispersed self and as an elusive marker of the subject's place in the social milieu, while locating the body under art in the context of a new China.[3]

The reading of a case study in Chinese body art echoes Jones' argument: "Body art … places the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic as a political domain … In its opening up of the interpretive relation and its active solicitation of spectatorial desire—provides the possibility for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity (both the artist's and our own). … (body art) demonstrates that meaning is an exchange and points to the impossibility of any practice being 'inherently' positive or negative in cultural value."[4] It will also review Jones' proposition of how body art opens out subjectivity as performative, contingent, and always par-

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[1] Jones, Amelia. *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*. USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 1.

[2] As in Jones' words, "works that involve the artist's enactment of her or his body in all of its sexual, racial, and other particularities and overtly solicit spectatorial desires unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions embedded in the formalist model of art evaluation." Ibid., 5.

[3] Ibid., 13.

[4] Ibid.

ticularized rather than universal, particularized within the meanings and cultural values ascribed to the work of art.[5]

This case study of the Chinese woman artist He Chengyao will not only come to political conclusions (when it is engaged with a phenomenological and feminist model as Jones suggests) but will also attempt to arrive at social, historical, and psychological conclusions.[6] It will further engage Jones' other arguments by demonstrating how He's work removes the representations of the female body from those in the dynamic of fetishism or consumerism, where the rapid development of cosmopolitanism and capitalization in China has nurtured the female body in its contemporary era.[7]

Contemporary Chinese Body Art: The Works and Their Background

Lisa Rofel used the phrase 'cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics' to describe the contemporary state of PRC, which may be seen as a replacement for the official term 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' that was adopted in the country's political propaganda.[8] While Rofel's phrase is controversial, the author uses it in her description (of the contemporary state of PRC) to refer to a broader sense of 'cosmopolitanism' that relates sexual, material, and affective desires to the country's economic development.[9] Rofel describes the tension facing the rapidly changing country as one between "an universal progressive identity through its formation of a consumer identity, and a domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China's place in the world."[10]

Rofel also argues that the way contemporary China domesticates cosmopolitanism is through a series of structured forgettings that reinvent the past. Here is what she refers to as the backwardness and

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[5] Ibid., 14.
[6] Ibid., 24.
[7] Ibid., 24
[8] Rofel argues "'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' is how the Chinese government comes to grips with tethering economic reform to neoliberal capitalism." See Rofel, Lisa. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, 111.
[9] Rofel said "It serves as one of the key nodes through which sexual, material, and affective desires bind citizen-subjects to state and transnational neoliberal policies." Ibid., 111.
[10] Ibid.

the political turmoil that China has gone through in the last century.[11] After Deng Xiaoping's economic reform in 1979, China was opened to international investment and trade and involved itself vigorously in a global economy. Cosmopolitanism often accompanies images of a newly global capitalism, and body representations are within the politics of representation in the globalization process in China, which Rofel sees as providing the staging for contemporary enactments of cosmopolitanism.[12] When PRC China became one of the greatest consumers in the world and when that consumption is about embodiment, consuming selves began to produce bodies and social selves through food, sex, and fashion, which are all around the making of bodies.[13] Slowly migrating to world citizenship, China has extended its influence beyond its geographical border to the international arena. This study agrees with Rofel's suggestion that the elaborate effort in building up a unique form of sexiness and other bodily practices that try to capture the desire to be a cosmopolitan state is also a national discourse about normality and the kinds of citizens that represent China to the world.

The contemporary dichotomous discourses of the private and the public whereby political domination and traditional ethics that regulate social bodies are increasingly yielding to individuals' choices are also operating in China. People's bodies are situated in tensions and contestations among age, gender, ethnicities, regions, and cultures that are all striving for identities and uniqueness. There are new Chinese faces and bodies in the media representing and legitimizing classes, sexualities, and ethnicities of a wide variety. These processes of publication are inevitably steeped in political and economic factors, which are representing bodies in ways that are enhancing the related desires of vision. The excitements of desire created through body performance and visual pleasures negotiate with the traditional discourses of the body that will soon be discussed in this study. This process works more vigorously in places with a repressive past like China, which is catching up through its search for new identities and images.

New media art has displaced body art in China these days, and the marketing process of paintings among art dealers has been very competitive both nationally and internationally. Body art has functioned

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[11] Ibid., 112.
[12] Ibid., 113.
[13] Ibid., 118.

as a decorative item in large art exhibition events, though people still recall those pioneers in the 1980s and 1990s and their innovative and stunning performances with strong social appeal and impact. The liberated strengths body artists achieved came along with the economic reform of the country in the 80s, which created a big psychological craze. Chinese artists realized the power of the body, as well as its rich and multi-layers of meaning. The realization parallels the realization of the power of conceptual and other new forms of art that have not yet been properly recognized in China. One can understand the gratification aroused by artistic and bodily expression against such a background in which most of the works favor personal, psychoanalytical, and accidental styles that are opposite to grand and mainstream political and social discourses.

The mainstream artistic and political discourses were gradually revised and replaced by new ideologies of a China that has blossomed in the last two decades. Contemporary art including popular genres like political pop and social cynicism is concerned with social reality and with addressing public issues in more direct ways, and it is refraining from expressing oppositional fervor. Body art, in particular, has been producing social commentary through the integration of individual artists' personal sensibility and their social existence. The common features presented are identified as violent, masochistic, multinational, exhibitionistic, scandalous and even immoral. Official parties and regional curators cautious about inviting possibly uncontrollable and unexpected scenes are not embracing body art. More and more Chinese artists have turned away from body art to the blooming market for visual art.

It is said that body art in general, using specific representations of the object body, has embraced notions of sickness and health, ugliness and beauty, abnormality and normality, and other oppositions,[14] which are also stimuli of visual desire when the body is regarded as something that demands and supplies images.[15] The question here is: how could women's bodies, in the form of artistic expression, enact women's political statements addressing issues like gender, social suppression, and human rights against the background of the New China where the male gaze in its broadest sense has been so penetrating?

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[14] Patricia & Inka S, ed. *Social Creatures. How Body Becomes Art*. Hannover: Hatje Cantz Sprengel Museum Hannover, 2004, 14.

[15] Ibid., 15.

Moira Gatens argues that traditional philosophical conceptions of corporeality are counterproductive to the attempt to construct an autonomous conception of women's bodies.[16] Iris Young—under the influences of Merleau-Ponty's account of the normal relationship between human bodies and their environment in actions—states that female bodily existence is commonly distinguished by three features: ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity. The discussion turns on the fact that for women there is a sense that the body is a subject as well as an object. It is the object of the gaze of others and an object frequently experienced by [the subject whose body it is] as limited and limiting. Young said it is important to recognize the specific and historically changing forms of restrictions that have been placed on women's movement, including such things as restrictive clothing and constricting conventions about female deportment and demeanor. She said that these modalities do not remain constant but are culturally variable, subject to changing circumstances and lifestyles.[17] Young's suggestions make a lot of sense when one reviews the issue of female body expression under the Chinese historical context. Yet in the conventions that ruled in Chinese history the notions of ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity would have different and more specific meanings.

In female body art, works usually involve the artist's enactment of her body in all of its sexual, class, and other particularities; and it will, Amelia Jones suggests, "overtly solicit spectatorial desire" that will unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions embedded in particular societies and their engendering processes.[18] It will therefore be necessary to come to an understanding of He's body performance in its cultural context.

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[16] Gatens, Moria, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London & N.Y.: Routledge, 1996), 25, 37 & 49.

[17] Young, Iris. *Throwing Like a Girl: And Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 143-148.

[18] Jones, 5.

The Body Art of He Chengyao

Deng Xiaoping's opening reforms brought about a whole series of changes in the public sphere. The scene of art, for instance, allowed artists not only to exhibit but also to try out new expressions that went beyond the canvas. Yet at the beginning the contemporary art scene in the 1980s met with restrictions. Performance art, known as xingwei yishu, emerged. Xingwei marks the behavioral aspect or conduct (pinxing) of a meaningful action that is articulated in art (yishu).[19]

At first Chinese contemporary art in general specifically responded to the political and social climate at the time, and any novelties introduced in the artistic practice were treated as a pernicious influence brought into the country from the west. Restrictions were put forward by political and official art institutions that soon became important incentives. The restrictions enhanced the creativeness and boldness of the artists in new Chinese artistic productions, even though they were meeting the restrictions, like those on being naked and nudity, on what behavior was allowed in public spaces. This explains the expression 'extreme' in the context of the work of He Chengyao, who presented about twenty pieces of body art from 2001 to 2006 in Asia, Europe, and North America.

He Chengyao was born in Chongqing, Sichuan in the 1960s to an unmarried couple. Her father was a photographer who worked outside the family, leaving her mother suffering from mental illness initiated by the condemnation she received from the public because of her illegal pregnancy and the birth of Chenyao. Soon after Chengyao was born in Chongqing, her parents were dismissed from their public jobs and moved to Rongchang, a very small village in Sichuan province. After her mother failed to stand the criticism and psychological pressure from her community, she had a nervous breakdown. During the Cultural Revolution, Chengyao recalled that her mother used occasionally to take off her clothes and scream and run around the village. She was then forced by her community to take medicines and to receive all kinds of treatment including acupuncture and folk practices that brought physical wounds all over her body. One could see in her work the wounds, intended to be an equivalent to those that her mother carried, that Chengyao later inflicted onto her own body.

[19] Berghuis 2006: 10.

Madness and family traumas have gradually become the main references of her artistic creativity.

He Chengyao graduated in 1989 from the Sichuan Art Academy where she started as an oil painter. She moved to Beijing in 2000 where she was enrolled in the Contemporary Art Research at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Her oil painting was described as surrealistic and expressionistic, focusing on relational themes between person and environment. She admitted that the suppression of her childhood memory and her deep feeling for her mother were just too strong for the media of oil painting. The illness of her mother and the poverty and suffering of her family left a deep wound in Chengyao's soul. It is believed that the wound started to heal after her first improvised body performance at the Great Wall.

This first bodywork was a nude piece presented at the Great Wall in China in 2001 that kicked off a series of her works relating bodies and family history. This first public performance was a real breakthrough and a turning point when Chengyao attended the opening event of the installation *Trash People* by the German artist H. A. Schult. The work began by displaying artificial human figures made of industrial waste lined up in two rows at the Jinshanling part of the Great Wall. Suddenly Chengyao stepped out of the audience, stripped off her red shirt and walked in between the artificial figures all the way to Beacon Tower. This entirely unexpected and improvised performance didn't only shock Schult and the audience, but also drew the attention of the media and the press to her. People at the site then walked with her and afterwards the line of action became the title of *Open the Great Wall*, This scene at the Great Wall was immediately reported and followed by severe attacks and criticisms being made by the public and the Chinese art circles. People regarded it as a piece made only to get attention. Chengyao concluded that she did not plan the work and that this was an unintended first piece of body art of hers. She attributed it to a mysterious call from within; she was aware of what had happened only as an epiphany when the walk ended. Yet when one reads another work of hers, *Homage to Joseph Beuys*, produced in the same year, what the previous work was supposed to manifest or show forth would have to be deciphered further. (Figure 30)

Contemporary Chinese visual artists have been paying homage to Beuys for several reasons, especially for his notion of art as therapy

when his creativity originated from his trauma in war.[20] Chengyao reworked Beuys' idea by holding a photo of her mother. Her face was painted with red fluid and her upper body was naked. She raised her head and her right hand reminding herself that the strength of her work came from her deep feeling for her mother; this seemed to be asking for therapy. Yet Chengyao used the Aristotelian word 'catharsis' instead of 'therapy' during interviews, stating that despite the attacks and pressures she received from her work, she succeeded in turning away from her fear of her mother's madness to understanding it, accepting, manifesting, and reconstructing it.

Chengyao presented a series of works after *Homage to Beuys*, including *My Mother and Me* in 2001.[21] Chengyao photographed her own nakedness together with her mother's; the idea came to her when she saw her mother in her nakedness playing with a rotten apple on the rooftop one afternoon. She felt for her and thought that her mother resembled an innocent child living in her lost world. She then stood behind her mother, also naked, and took seven photographs for the series of *My Mother and Me*.[22] One would notice the facial expression of Chengyao's mother, who looked at her daughter behind her with perplexity and curiosity. In six out of the seven photographic pieces, one finds Chengyao's mother as the only subject, with her naivety and innocence being captured in the centre. She certainly is the centre, looking at her daughter beyond herself and the frame. She could not leave Chengyao out of her sight.

The work *Witness* produced later in 2002 is a continuation of the theme, this time with the naked body of Chengyao's son inserted in the photo series. Chengyao, her mother, and her son all posed for the photographic recording, and Chengyao regarded her son's body as one of those who was minoritized and marginalized as her mother was.[23] Yet together with this reading is Chengyao's fear of the possibility of the son's inheriting the madness from her mother, as her mother might have inherited it from Chengyao's grandfather. It is obvious

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[20] Written by Beuys, J., edited by Klaus Staeck, *Honey is flowing in all directions*, Heidelberg: Edition Staeck; Steidl, 1997.

[21] He Chengyao, "Mama and I", body art presented in August 2001 in Chonghing, China.

[22] "Spirit in Painting" (author unknown), *New Vision in Chinese Photography*, Taipei, 2004, p. 78-81.

[23] He Chengyao, "Raise Your Forehead," *Cruel/Loving Bodies*, Shanghai: Doran Modern Art Museum, 2006, pp. 26-28.

that Chengyao might have feared the madness within herself, and the manifest nakedness is a statement, a therapy, and a form of catharsis. It was also the first time that Chengyao's son met his grandma, and the position of the poses suggested a continuation of some sort, related to trauma and family history and the struggles of a mother and a daughter.

Despite the political context of China in the 1960s, the social treatment of a lunatic remained violent and full of folk superstitions and beliefs. Chengyao's mother received all kinds of imaginative treatments, echoing Foucault's writings on madness. According to the memory of the artist, her mother once was held down on a wooden board by the people's liberation army where she was forced to receive acupunctural treatment. The woman screamed and struggled in vain when she was getting ninety nine needles inserted all over her. Chengyao then produced the work *99 Needles* in 2002 memorializing the event. (Figure 31) She stated clearly that she dedicated the work to her suffering mother and repented for her own helplessness. After receiving 99 needles by an acupuncturist, her body was red and swollen. She made a series of photographs of her naked body pierced from the waist up by the needles. Some of the needles were not put in correctly and the artist started to bleed in her right wrist and fainted. It was obvious to the artist that this was the same pain her mother had gone through and that the regrets she felt for not being able to help her mother had acted as a form of physical and mental compensation. She confessed that she had been indifferent to her mother's suffering and had tried hard to forget the fact that her mother had suffered from carrying her in her premarital pregnancy.

After *Open the Great Wall*, Chengyao got into body art to the extent that she reconstructed what happened in the history of the peasant village onto the context of contemporary city life through her work, which had become durational, repetitional and ritualistic. Critics read the repetition in her work as necessary reinforcement for its effects in initiating empathy, first by repeating the pain in the artist from real facts in life and second by repeating it among the audiences.[24] Yet Chengyao realized that her mother was indifferent to what she had done, as she shut herself within her own world.

These works of body art would be therapeutic only to the artist herself. However, when the expression extreme in these works is read

[24] "Spirit in Painting", pp. 78-81.

in the historical context in China, they have much to share with people within the context. One of the controversial performance pieces produced by Chengyao in 2004 demonstrated this. The piece titled *Public Broadcast Exercise* had the artist's body wrapped all over in white tape while she was doing a series of exercises that were radio broadcast in public places all over China during the Mao era. (Figure 33) The tape was sticky so when the artist was moving, her limbs got stuck. It produced awful sounds when she tried to unbind the tapes. The sounds were so annoying they made the audience feel extremely uncomfortable. Imaginative pain occurred because it sounded as though her skin was being ripped off. The performance recalled the time when the socialist regime tried hard to suppress any form of individualism and promoted collectivism. The work also echoed Chengyao's realization that her mother's disrupted body and soul had acted in a way to survive the various forms of pressure exerted from the outer world.

Chengyao tried more and different styles of body art starting in 2003, but maintained the expression extreme. She was concerned at that time with the materialistic exchanges in human relationships, something that had become serious since the economic reform in China. She asked for physical exchanges and collaborations from her audience through the tongue and the mouth. Her work also reflected on the hegemony of western culture and issues related to globalism and post-colonialism. She had her long hair cut when she presented *The Possibility of Hair* in Manchester in the UK in 2006, announcing another stage of creativity by denouncing the long entanglement in her personal history. A long text was gone as well, together with her attempts at therapy through art.[25]

Expression Extreme, Nudity and Body Trauma

Even before *Open the Great Wall*, He's works were read as challenges to patriarchal cultures via female bodies. Her oil paintings from the beginning were described by her academy in Sichuan as a post-modern woman's lament, and critic Gao Minglu regarded the nakedness in her work as "extreme appeals to women suppression and tortures".[26]

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[25] He Chengyao, "The Possibilities of Hair," body performance, 2006, at the Chinese Center of Manchester, U. K.

[26] Gao Minglu, *Wall: History and Border of Chinese Contemporary Art.* Beijing: Chinese People University Press, pp. 256-272.

The story of Chengyao's mother demonstrates themes like the male gaze, female insanity, and the history of male-centered discourses. Her bodywork *Illusion* in 2002 was an example of gender reflection in which the male audience in attendance was given a mirror and asked to reflect sunlight onto the surrounding wall. Chengyao dressed in white and followed the reflected light everywhere, demonstrating females' daily practices of passivity and subordination.[27]

Yet Chengyao rejected the label of feminist artist, and her rejection might be a reaction to the cliché of western art labels frequently being stamped onto contemporary Chinese art since the 1980s. This label has not been positively received in China even by some of the fervent subversives. The comments were that most of the feminist art in China had not succeeded in posing strong criticism of the root or ground of its patriarchal culture, and there were no gender issues common to the artists, but only their personal accusations and statements. As Gao had suggested, contemporary women artists in China emphasized personality rather than the minority status of a gendered class. There were no attempts to deconstruct or reconstruct the power within, nor were there discourses on core-gendered norms and values as there were in the west. There were only some revisions of male languages.[28] But Chengyao's work did come close, with her extreme expression addressing social, political, and cultural suppression through personal trauma and her family history of madness. Her works also fit perfectly with the parameters of peculiarity in both personal and contextual dimensions that Amelia Jones suggests and in some of the common agendas discussed in feminist aesthetics.[29]

The elements of madness and the therapeutic attempts in Chengyao's work are two of its peculiar parameters, with madness a cultural construction that results in social marginalization and oppression in the modern history of China. The family trauma of the artist could be read as a page in the nation's history, both of its internal turmoil and of the

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[27] He Chengyao, "Illusions," body performance, 2002, Beijing Art Archive Gallery, China.

[28] Gao, pp. 256-272.

[29] It was noted at the beginning of this article that Jones described how body art "opens out subjectivity as performative, contingent, and always particularized rather than universal, implicating the interpreter within the meanings and cultural values ascribed to the work of art." (See note 5). On feminist aesthetics, please refer to the author's discussion: Eva Kit Wah Man, "Some Reflections on the Notion of 'Feminist Aesthetics'," paper from the XIV Congress of the International Association of Empirical Aesthetics, Prague, August, 1996, p. 5.

ideology of evolutionary reform. The calm and silent artistic treatments of Chengyao prove to be as powerful as the body art of Hermann Nitsch or the famous Marina Abramovic. They are also in a sense more effective than the shocking work of some of Chengyao's Chinese contemporaries, like the eating-baby performance of Ju Li and the self-mutilation of Yang Zichao. Her works demonstrate that the re-enacting of personal memories through real bodies can tell all.

It should be noted that body art in the Chinese tradition has long been normalized in symbolized, operatic, and ritualistic ways. Nudity itself has not become a tradition, especially after the Zong and the Ming schools of Confucian discourses had successfully promoted strict Confucian suppression of the bodily desires. It is to be noted that the depiction of female bodies in traditional Chinese paintings and sculptures has always been linear, simple, and devoid of sensuous elements, when more sensuous details could be found in poetry and literature. Visual nakedness and nudity were rare. Body aesthetics was molded by the Confucian and Daoist discourses, and the former dominated the public presentations. Particular social constraints on female bodies and related codes were strictly practiced in the Confucian and Daoist traditions, with their internalized moral codes and values. This continued till the nineteenth century when Chinese paintings were under strong western influences and shady and voluptuous female bodies were portrayed in the western styles.

Chengyao's representation of nudity is, therefore, a form of expression extreme and is very effective in making its strong contribution to the discourses of madness and marginalization in her country, echoing Foucault's ideas of the synchronic emergence of madness and artistic creativity.[30] According to the artist's confession, she started to do body art as a cure for her wounded soul and as a personal, inner urge. She further believed that her art could be therapeutic to many others who were neglected and marginalized in shared social and political contexts. The madness involved was a personal or a family matter but had a social address. Chengyao soon started to make documentary films of her surroundings. She taped families with mental patients from her hometown, Rongchang. Critics saw this as a trans-

[30] Foucault, M. *Madness and Civilization.* (Chinese trans. by Liu Beicheng & Yang Yuenying, Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2003.

formation from a personal declaration to social criticism, a fervent form of body politics.[31]

Amelia Jones defines body art as one of the most dramatic and radical types of cultural production that destroyed the modernist subject, and one wonders about the implications of Jones' statement for He Chengyao's body art. It is certain that Chengyao incorporated socialist, family, and gender peculiarities in subversive and accusatory gestures. The boldness, roughness, and violence of what was done to the female body were demonstrations of body politics, and the juxtaposition of the bodies of her mother and her son posed significant readings of a political history. The liberation of Chinese bodies and their public showing in the artist's work referred to notions of freedom and captivity. The pain induced by her art was related to social therapy, and the catharsis she suggested was collective.

According to John Berger, nakedness reveals itself while nudity is placed on display by another and is a form of dress.[32] In Chengyao's bodywork nudity was in the form of performance, in which she acted to recollect and to heal. It was also performed to meet the expectations and conventions of a particular culture and situation. In his writing, Kenneth Clark explained at length how to distinguish the naked from the nude. A nude body, according to Clark, is not fragile but is a balanced, prosperous, and confident one; it is a body re-formed. This thesis negates some critics' reading that the bodies of Chengyao were huddled and defenseless. Instead, the nude body is the central subject of her art, which provides the means and the occasion to figure forth something meaningful.[33]

François Jullian suggests that nakedness implies a diminished state, one of being stripped and laid bare, and carries with it a concomitant notion of feeling shame or causing pity. Yet nudity, on the contrary, is one of plenitude. It is total presence offering itself for contemplation.[34] Echoing this suggestion, one saw no sense of shamefulness, shyness, or guilt-ridden feelings in Chengyao's performance, but willfulness on her face and innocence on that of her mother. This confirms Jones' statement about body art that in it the body becomes the

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[31] http://www.art-here.net/html/av/4697_1.html

[32] Berger, J quotation. thinkexist.com/.../nakedness_reveals...nudity.../325425.html

[33] Clark, K. *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956, 3-6.

[34] Jullian 2007: 4.

locus of a dispersed self and an elusive marker of the subject's place in the social world.[35]

Body Art as Recuperation and Others

There are reasons among contemporary Chinese visual artists, including He Chengyao, reasons for making salutes to Joseph Beuys. It is said that Beuys' charisma and eclecticism polarized his audience into those who uncritically accepted his own explanations as interpretive solutions to his work and those who were relentlessly critical of Beuys' rhetoric and reduced the potential of his work to the specific material properties of the works themselves.[36] But perhaps some of the common legacies of Beuys appropriated by Chinese artists are art's restorative, healing powers, even though viewing contemporary Chinese works of visual art may require close attention to the cultural specificity of their iconographical and visual references. Some suggest that an existing strain of thought extending back to the 1980s that distanced itself from a straightforward alignment of post-revolutionary Chinese culture with postmodernism marks a difference from Jones' discussion of postmodern bodies. After the ruptures of the Cultural Revolution, postmodern bodies were read as renegotiations rather than straightforward alignments between present and historical Chinese cultures. The Cultural Revolution is arguably a Chinese counterpart to Germany under Nazism, to which post-war German artists such as Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer have addressed themselves.[37]

It is obvious that He's idea of art as cure or recuperation might have been inspired and motivated by Joseph Beuys. Her work *Homage to Beuys* was based on a copy of a performance Beuys made in 1964 at the auditorium of the Technical College in Aachen in Germany. It was performed on the date of the twentieth anniversary of an assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. He Chengyao should have noted that Beuys' performance irritated the audience and was interrupted by physical attacks. The artist, in return, provocatively saluted the audience by raising his hand in the Nazi style while holding a cross in the other

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[35] Ibid., 13.

[36] He Chenggao, "Raise Your Forehead," *Cruel/Loving Bodies*, Shanghai: Doran Modern Art Museum, 2006, pp. 26-28.

[37] See *Yishu, Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, www.yishujournal.com/story.aspx?uid=2008032112014162

hand. Instead of holding a cross, He Chengyao in her homage held a picture of her semi-nude mother and with the other hand saluted in the way Beuys did. In one of the artist's interviews, she herself admitted that the piece was her way to express gratitude to Beuys, who had shown her the therapeutic way that art could recuperate and heal.

Chengyao started to make documentary films that were ways to self-recollections and rediscoveries. One critic commented that the shift from photography to video documentaries demonstrated a transformation from the artist's personal declaration to social concern.[38] The silent way of directing and conducting the production of images of a prohibited space is a strong protest in itself. The particularizations, as pointed out by Jones, involved the dimensions of gender, madness, social marginalization, and political repression in contemporary Chinese history.

It is interesting to read about Chengyao's work in exhibitions with the theme of global feminism.[39] When *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007 was criticized for its unresolved contradictions in the underlying concept, the exhibits of Chengyao in the exhibition did fulfill its objectives in the sense they demonstrated different obstacles and circumstances women face in different cultures.[40]

We can start the discussion by mentioning that during the awakening period in the late 1980s following the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, women characters in new fictions or in the so-called Scar literature were liberated figures who emerged as individual spirits with sexual awakening in search of the real meanings of life, love, and gendered being. Yet the economic reform promoted by Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s had an impact on the market economy that re-enhanced and re-legitimated the male gaze and the desire for women's bodies. The trend was the globalization of the value of slim bodies and homogeneous standards of female beauty, whereby developing countries competed with the west by duplicating the process of modernization,

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[38] http://www.art-here.net/html/av/4697_1.html

[39] He was a featured artist in *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin in 2007.

[40] Martyna, Renee. "Whither Global Feminism?" Carleton University. 2007 http://www.carleton.ca/e-merge/docs_vol3/articles/Whither_Global_Feminism.pdf, 12. See the catalogue of the exhibition edited and written by the curator, Maura Reilly, published for and by the Brooklyn Museum on the exhibited event *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* 2007.

confirming the observation that they are the big consumers of technological devices, fashions, and cosmetics. Female bodies then became the contested sites and symbols of modernization, economic growth, and national pride in the new China. Standard female faces and bodies were stamped on pictures at beauty parlors and magazine covers all over the country. Women's sexual awakening was clearly tied to the dynamics of the state and the world beyond, when people began to discuss cosmopolitanism using Chinese characteristics. One could then see from the particular social changes how Chengyao's body art is being subversive in the sense of healing, recuperating, and making criticisms and protests.

When global feminism refers to a movement of women's rights on a global scale, it claims to dismantle the currently predominant structures of global patriarchy, and from this sense come the notions of transnational feminism, world feminism, and international feminism. Yet challenges were raised when it was soon realized that the impact of first world women's movements upon the living and working conditions of third world women was as consumers and that "the levels of culturally validated oppressions, exclusions, violation and surveillance that women experience … are very high."[40] Under the calls of global feminism, there is the common project of a utopian form of emancipation, yet postmodern discourses confirm conceptualizations of difference. There were calls asking that respect be given to different histories and situations and the related and different tactics and strategies, including those in art.

He Chengyao made the following artist statement for the event [the *Global Feminisms* exhibition] in her own words:[41]

> Feminism is a remote topic in my country where I live. China is always a male-dominated world, although the Chinese Communist Party had tried to abolish the old male-dominated system so that every one had a right to obtain an occupation. We had already shortened the discrimination between male and female and established the 'equal rights' constitution between female/male. But in fact, the equality is not based on the rights from individual liberation and fair opportunity. Sexual unfairness and discrimination in social status as well still exist between female and male. Most people still conform to the traditional sexual division of labor. Individual value and rights of female are still ignored … I (also) wish that I can speak about the feminism topic with my own voice

[41] See He's artist statement, ibid.

> through taking part in such kinds of exhibition and making more and more artworks. Women [on their] own are capable of [the] holding of the world.

It is obvious that He's body art is more powerful in its own articulation in demonstrating particularities rather than the common project of a utopian form of emancipation.

PART TWO

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

METAPHYSICS IN CHINESE ART*

Abraham Kaplan

I

Every culture has an implicit metaphysics that provides the basic perspectives in which the world is seen and the basic guidelines for responding to what is seen. There is a distinctive thought-world structuring cognition and a distinctive ethos structuring evaluation. Every culture experiences the domains of fact and of value in its own way. The metaphysics of a culture is only intermittently made explicit and then only to a degree. Implicit metaphysics does not depend on professional philosophy for its expression. It is the metaphysics of a culture just because the whole culture expresses it. Politics, art, religion, economics, and morals may all reflect the same thought-world and ethos. A society is not a congeries of disparate institutions; it has an inner unity, articulated in its implicit metaphysics.

There may be heterogeneity too; different and even dissonant subcultures can sometimes be identified. Unities are as easily overstated as overlooked. 'East' and 'west', for instance, do not identify distinctive metaphysics, though the terms have their use. Each glosses over internal divisions and exaggerates both inner sameness and difference from the other. Even the narrower label 'Chinese' is societal rather than cultural, comprising three major metaphysics—Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist.

II

Art is a major constituent of a culture; it also expresses the culture. It is culture-saturated, "fragrant of its time."[1] It is not, however, culture-

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* This article was published with the permission of the University Library Special Collections of California State Polytechnic University in Pomona. I thank my friend and colleague, Allan Casebier, for bringing the article to my attention.

[1] Laurence Binyon, *The Spirit Of Man In Asian Art*, Dover, 1965, p. 7. I am heavily indebted throughout to this fine book.

bound having significance only for members of the culture. Art speaks to all who have learned to listen to its distinctive speech. Art brings close the thought-world and ethos of remote societies. Through art alien cultures become naturalized. Art can speak to us even if we are ignorant of the thought-world and ethos from which it sprang; we perceive it as meaningful or we would not recognize it as art at all. What it is saying, however, is seen only dimly, in proportion to our ignorance of its culture. Art explains its times and is explained by them.

Art vividly displays the physiognomy of the mind; yet it is not revelatory in every respect. There are, for instance, requirements imposed by materials and by available techniques for transforming the materials. Geometrical designs in fabrics from the American Southwest, Rumania, the Caucasus, and Iran may owe more to folk technologies of weaving than to Platonist thought-worlds. Art is especially important to the student of the past because a work of art is unlikely to survive unless it is meaningful to its society, embodying some cultural value. The kind of art that John Dewey castigated as the beauty-parlor of civilization is as ephemeral as fashions usually are. There are, to be sure, more and less enduring materials; material can explain why some art has been lost, but material alone does not explain why certain art has survived.

Artists are notably sensitive to their times, even giving anticipatory expression to inchoate social processes: several schools of Post-Impressionist painting prefigured the violence and irrationalism of our century. This sensitivity is especially important for Chinese art; many Chinese artists were also philosophers, scholars, and priests. In Chinese art ideational content, though latent as it must be in all but didactic art, is not far below the surface.

Aesthetics has long recognized that art deals with universals; for this reason, Aristotle argues, poetry is more philosophical than history. If art derives from nature it is thereby also a mirror of the mind, for it is the mind, as Kant insisted, that makes nature intelligible. The psychic distance in aesthetic contemplation is close kin to philosophical detachment. In its own expressive language, art, like philosophy, articulates communal values, giving form to chaos and human significance to the trivial and absurd. In looking to implicit metaphysics no distinction is to be drawn between pure and applied art, or between fine art and decorative art, 'a sterilizing divorce', Laurence Binyon

called it.[2] Such distinctions are not easy to draw in western art; in Chinese art, scholars warn, the distinctions break down altogether.[3]

III

The subject matters of a culture's art provide a starting point for grasping its metaphysics. Not all arts are representational. Where there is representation, the subject matter is not to be confused with the aesthetic substance. Neither is it altogether irrelevant. The content of a portrait, say, depends on how the person is portrayed; it also depends on who is being portrayed, noble or commoner, saint or sinner, warrior, merchant or priest. A representational art in which subject counts for nothing also tells us something about its culture. It implies, a historian of Chinese art suggests, "if not a corrupt view of the world, then at least a dangerously fragmented one."[4] When Count Ciano compared the effect of the bombing of an Ethiopian village to the beauty of unfolding roses he revealed something of the ethos of Italian fascism. This was in striking contrast to what is expressed in Picasso's treatment of a bombing in his *Guernica*. Rembrandt painted a flayed ox hanging in a butcher-shop; a painting with similar shapes, colors and textures would have a decidedly different content if it depicted Christ hanging on a the cross.

The Crucifixion is a common theme of western painting. Scenes of violence—rapes, executions, massacres, tortures—are in the west a frequent subject-matter. Such scenes are wholly absent from Chinese painting. Even animals are never represented fighting. The closest approach in far eastern art to the depiction of violence is in Tibetan renderings of demonology and Japanese sculptures of guardians of the gate. Even here violence is seldom explicitly shown; it is represented only as a threat. Another marked difference in the subject matters of Chinese art and western painting is in the depiction of the nude. There is a deeply rooted prejudice against the nude in Chinese art. A modern Chinese art historian and critic explains, "The human body grows corrupt from the crooked thoughts it harbors, and so we do not care to

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[2] *Ibid.,* p. 216.

[3] William Willetts, *Chinese Art*. 2 Vols., Penguin, 1958, Vol. I, p. 2.

[4] Michael Sullivan, "The Heritage of Chinese Art," in Raymond Dawson (ed.), *The Legacy of China*, Oxford, 1971, p. 196.

paint it."[5] As in the art of Flanders and North Germany, the only nudes portrayed are the pitiful figures of the damned. There is no celebration of the flesh, like that by Poussin, Boucher, Renoir, and countless other western painters. The two subject matters, sex and violence—scarcely to be found in Chinese art—account for about one fifth of the western painting and sculpture; for instance, in five art histories at hand, they comprise 511 illustrations of a total of 2,534.

A Sung Dynasty catalogue of the emperor's collection (1120 AD) classified paintings by the following subject-matters: Taoist and Buddhist subjects; human affairs (literally, men and things, that is, genre paintings); palaces and other buildings; landscapes (shan-shui; literally mountain-water); nature—birds and flowers, bamboos, vegetables and fruits, grasses and insects, dragons and fishes, animals. There is one other category: foreign tribes, an anticipation, in reverse, of the nineteenth century French obsession with Chinoiserie, Gauguin's pre-occupation with the South Pacific, and Picasso's interest in African art.

Subject matters are seen in Chinese culture as manifestations of a fundamental and pervasive duality: yin and yang. It is a duality, not a dualism. Dualism implies an unbridgeable gulf between two categories, even an ineluctable opposition between them as in Plato's dualism of sense and reason, St. Paul's dualism of flesh and spirit, the Stoic dualism of feeling and thought, and Descartes' dualism of body and mind. The duality of yin-yang is a both/ and relationship rather than an either/ or; yin and yang are co-present. Moreover, each contains an element of the other. Rather than opposition between them there is a creative tension, not an antithesis but a polarity. These features of the duality are represented in the tai-chi t'u symbol: two interlocking commas forming a perfect circle, one comma black and one red, each with a dot of the other color in its center. Chinese aesthetics relies on the same categories for the analysis of painting. Not only are subject matters yin and yang (respectively, clouds and sky, or water and mountains); aesthetic qualities, too, embody the duality. The invisible, expressiveness, is yin while the visible, the expressive vehicle, is yang. 'Atmosphere' is counter-posed to movement, the shady to the clear, dark to light. How the effects are obtained is also a matter of yin and yang: ink and brush, solid ink and whiteness, black and red.

Chinese aesthetics is linked to semantics, since Chinese painting tends to be literary. Writing, conversely, is esteemed as one of the arts,

[5] Chiang Yee, *The Chinese Eye*, Indiana University Press, 1964, p. 10.

—calligraphy—quite apart from its qualities as literature. In Chinese the same character designates both writing and painting. Every written character has at least two shades of meaning, a spiritual meaning (yin) and a natural meaning (yang). Metaphor is built into the Chinese language to an even greater degree than is usual in western languages.

IV

The subject matter of a work of art does not embody the metaphysics of a culture as significantly as do the ways in which art is created and responded to in the culture. In China, especially in the Ming Dynasty, the artist was usually wen-sen, literally, a man of letters, but more broadly, a gentleman, amateur, and poet. For such a man, art was "not a profession but a passion."[6] Here we find the Confucian strain in Chinese art. The Confucian ideal is the cultured gentleman, civilized and urbane. Both these English words are from Greek and Latin roots pointing to the universal and ancient conflict in human societies between the life of the city and of the country. The Confucian is a city man; he may be found in the garden but not often in mountains or fields. He has grown old in the ways of civilized society. In Chinese legend, Confucius was born at the age of 84. Confucian philosophy, it has been said, celebrates the romance of old age, as Nietzsche celebrates youth and Aristotle maturity. In the recurrent Chinese phrase, Confucianism aspires to sageliness within, kingliness without.

Art in China is often a way of life. Central to Confucianism is the concept of li, in a narrow sense, ritual, but more broadly, what to do and the proper way to do it. One of the five cardinal virtues of Confucianism is fitness. In art this is form, not only in the aesthetic sense but also in the meaning it has in the British phrase 'good form'. Manners, morals, and art are all one, a perspective shared by Plato.

Confucian art, especially in the Han Dynasty, was largely didactic, meant to serve political and educational ends. Chinese art is as far removed as can be from the pop art, junk art, and other forms of anti-art of our day. If art is a matter of propriety, it, like other forms of proper conduct, is governed by tradition. In Confucian China, tradition was more powerful, continuous, and tyrannical than in the West. By some, the assessment is more extreme: the Confucians, it is charged,

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[6] Laurence Binyon, *The Flight Of The Dragon*, Murray, 1953, p. 110.

wanted to make China into "a moral machine, where every rite, ceremony, industry and even thought should be conducted along preestablished formulae. Their ideal is uniformity; their standard is not insight but authority; their conception of literature bounded by the dictionary; what they hate most is any manifestation of human freedom."[7] Were this indictment wholly warranted there would be no Confucian art at all, for art of whatever style is pre-eminently a manifestation of human freedom. Artistic freedom, however, may be confined within bounds set by artistic convention or by external norms, like the insistence on socialist realism in Stalin's Russia or the continuing Soviet proscription of abstract expressionism.

Beyond dispute is the importance of traditional and fixed rules governing Chinese painting, like the rules promulgated by the French Academy in the heyday of Neo-Classicism. In the second century T'sai Yung laid down nine rules of calligraphy, called the Nine Influences. Six rules of painting, the Six Canons, formulated by the portrait painter Hsieh Ho (c. 500 AD), remained for centuries the standard of art criticism. Rules proliferated. Confucian moralism is expressed in a distinctive way. Confucianism is a positive philosophy, quite lacking in the vivid depictions of moral laxity, for the sake of denouncing it, to be found in western prophets, preachers, reformers, and painters. "The depiction of evil deeds, of the mean in human nature, the satirical treatment of life," says a Chinese art historian, "these are unknown in the history of our art."[8] There are no Chinese equivalents of Hogarth, Goya, and Daumier.

Characteristically Confucian is a quality of proportion, moderation, and restraint that is exhibited in art as in action. The Confucian ideal of chung (the mean) ho (harmony, proportion) is readily apparent in a certain restrained style of Chinese architecture, a style which contrasts strikingly with the garish decorativeness of, say, the shrine at Nikko in Japan and with the grotesque exuberance of the temple of Ellora in India, though the qualities of both express what is also to be found in other strains of Chinese culture. In Confucian thought there are no lines dividing metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. Nature, society, and art are constructed on the same principles; each is reflected in the others and is illuminated by them. The human social order corresponds to a universal cosmic order, a belief that has been described

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[7] Ernst F. Fenollosa, *Epochs Of Chinese And Japanese Art*, 2 Vols., Dover, 1953, Vol. II, p. 142.

[8] Yee, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

as "innate in the Chinese over most of their history."[9] The correspondence is made manifest in art. Sung landscape painting, for instance, reveals man's conviction of "a coherence and order running through [his environment], the same conviction which inspired Sung philosophers to erect the vast and orderly structure of the Neo-Confucian cosmology."[10]

This coherence and order is also embodied in the structure of society and of art. Each consists of many parts, and every part is "logically related to the other, the smallest stroke to the whole … In just such a way was the country of China conceived in Confucian ethics … As in the painting, an overriding sense of the rightness of relationships culminated in a harmonious unity made of thousands of separate elements."[11] In turn, art, like society, should be "tranquil, harmonious and meaningful."[12] This is very like the quality in classical Greek art which Nietzsche called Apollonian and which Spengler generalized to a component of the metaphysics of culture allegedly manifested in a certain stage of the growth and decline of all cultures. The generalization is dubious; that it characterizes the Confucian strain in Chinese art is undeniable.

Confucian perspectives combine idealism and realism. The spiritual values pursued in these perspectives are perceived as localized in this world, not in some transcendent domain. "The way of Heaven is evident," says Confucius in the *Analects* "… Let me not say that it is high aloft above me. It ascends and descends about our doings." A Confucian looks to heaven but his feet are firmly planted on earth. A similar idealistic realism is to be found in the metaphysics of Jewish culture: the law is not far off in heaven or beyond the sea—it is in man's heart (*Deuteronomy* 30:11-14). The significance of this metaphysics for art is that nature—the world of human experience—is not set in opposition to the domain of human value. By contrast, in Europe nature was perceived for centuries as essentially evil except when transformed by human effort. Nature in the wild with its mountains, rivers, rain, wind, and wave was deemed hostile to the heaven-directed human spirit. Natural beauty was not appreciated in the West until the nineteenth century.

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[9] Willetts, *op. cit.,* Vol. I, p. 269.
[10] James Cahill, *Chinese Paintings*, Crown, no date, p. 8.
[11] John D. La Plante, *Asian Art*, Brown, 1968, p. 114.
[12] Sullivan, *op. cit.,* p. 196.

In China, Laurence Binyon has pointed out again and again, there is no barrier between man and nature, but on the contrary "a deep and abiding sense of their companionship," an intimacy revealed in Chinese art. What is most typical of the nature art of China is its presenting nature as "a mirror of the mind of man."[13] Chinese culture has no myth of a Tower of Babel, of a Faust, or of a Prometheus. Man does not set out to conquer the heavens, nor to master the world whether in thought or in action. Man prospers only in so far as he learns to live in harmony with the world[14]—not in submission to the will of the gods but in fulfillment of his own nature. Chinese art expresses the Confucian metaphysics in presenting the forces of nature as harmoniously interacting, in showing man in his true relationship with the rest of nature rather than opposing one to the other, and above all, in showing the life in all things, the meaning and worth in all things as man experiences them. European landscape painting was closest to the Chinese when it humanized nature as in the landscapes of Giorgione, Titian and Poussin, but without reliance on myth and legend. Chinese painting itself is most esteemed in its treatment of landscape, a treatment that includes all forms of life, the abundance of nature and the activities of man each reflected in the other. Such painting is the epiphany of Confucian metaphysics.

V

Classical China is not only Confucian; it is also Buddhist. Of the two, so far as their influence on art is concerned, Buddhism is probably the more important. Buddhist art is more than a presentation of conventional Buddhist symbols. It provides visual images of a metaphysical structure, conveying in the language of line and color a spirituality that transcends sensory experience. This is done by a number of artistic devices. Buddhism espouses an objective relativism, not unlike that of American pragmatism. What is experienced is objective, but relative to the standpoint of the particular observer. This epistemology is embodied in Buddhist painting by the use of multiple perspectives.[15] This is not the Cubist technique of presenting objects at once from

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[13] Laurence Binyon, *Painting in the Far East*, Dover, 1959, pp 23-4; SPIRIT, *op. cit.,* p. 74. FLIGHT, *op. cit.,* p. 42.

[14] Kenneth S. Latourette, *The Chinese; Their History And Culture*, 1963, p. 730.

[15] Anil De Silva, *The Art Of Chinese Landscape Painting*, Greystone, 1968, p. 37.

several sides, like the Picasso portraits in which a face is shown simultaneously in profile and frontally. It is, rather, giving each pictorial element of a landscape, say, its own angle from which it must be seen so that each has a horizon of its own, the observer thereby being led to see the landscape from several angles.

Similarly, the Buddhist doctrine of anitya (impermanence) that all is process, change, as well as the Buddhist emphasis on the unity of all things, is embodied in the refusal of Buddhist painters to arrest reality at a single instant of time or to localize it as a single point in space, in contrast to French Impressionism, for instance. There is a Chinese impressionism embodying the outlook of Ch'an Buddhism, the progenitor of Zen. Ch'an embraces the possibility of sudden enlightenment, a moment of insight in which the teachings of Buddhism are realized in direct experience, unmediated by conceptualization of doctrine. Ch'an painting presents the world as experienced in such moments. Subject matter becomes largely irrelevant since the Buddha-nature permeates all things; in every fragment of nature we can perceive the whole. Like the English romantic poets, as R. H. Blythe has documented in his *Zen In English Literature and Oriental Classics*, Ch'an sees eternity in a grain of sand, what God and man are in a flower plucked from the crannied wall, human nature and destiny in a wee, timorous, cowerin' beastie, a field mouse. The seemingly trivial, absurd, or grotesque may lend themselves all the more to such presentation: inner realities are more clearly seen when there is nothing in outer appearances to distract us.

Ch'an painting relies heavily on the purity of black ink on the whiteness of paper or silk. Not only is this the most simple and direct treatment of its materials and the subject, but color is resisted also as dwelling too much on the surface of things; a point of view reflected to this day in the religious garb of many cultures and denominations. The Ch'an artist relies not on color and outer form, but on the movement of the ink, the boldness and vitality of his brushwork. Because Ch'an stands opposed to intellectualization and vicarious experience, Ch'an painting does not allow the viewer to remain merely a spectator. All art demands an effort of creative imagination from the viewer as well as from the artist. The perceived work of art is the outcome of what we, with the stimulation and guidance of the artist, bring to the perception from the depths of our own being. The Ch'an painter helps as little as can be so that we are strained to the utmost, as in the spiritual discipline of Ch'an practice. The creation and response to art is

itself such a discipline, later made manifest in the profound influence of Zen on Japanese culture, as Daisetz Suzaki has amplified.

For Ch'an painting, a mere hint is preferred to fully explicit statement. If a word to the wise is sufficient, saying little may draw out the wisdom already there within all sentient beings. A twelfth century Ch'an book begins: "To see horns behind a hedge, and know at once that they are buffalo's; in one corner to make the nature of the other three clear … that is like daily bread for the disciple of Ch'an." The writer, as his readers would immediately recognize, is relating Ch'an Buddhism to the older Chinese tradition by quoting Confucius *(Analects*, VII, 8): "I show one corner, and if a man cannot find the other three, I am not going to repeat myself." Cha'an painters followed this teaching more closely than many Confucians. Ch'an art is notably free of didacticism, of representations embodying points of doctrine. It is also free of ritualistic or miracle-working images, in contrast to the conventional Buddhist teaching (as in the Lotus Sutra) that virtue can be attained though the sheer multiplication of Buddhist images. Instead, the onlooker is provided with a quiet scene in the contemplation of which he may lose his awareness of the earth and find the god within himself. Ch'an culminates in pictures that are nearly empty, confronting us with "formless forms" in a "thundering silence."[16]

VI

A third major Chinese metaphysics is Taoism, as old as Confucianism and perhaps as influential, though in a manner less overt and institutionalized. Confucianism is an urban philosophy; Taoism embodies the perspectives and ideals of the farmer. It is concerned with attunement more to nature than to society and its norms. A free soul cares little for laws, the laws of logic and ethics no more than man-made constraints. The complexities of civilization are to be replaced by a simple, natural life-style. The style is recognizable in art as well. Taoism is embodied in a disdain for the depiction of everyday human affairs. It is also expressed in the rejection of anything that smacks of being over-civilized: artificial, decorated, and elaborate. The west speaks of gilding the lily; the Taoist version is this: a novice, having painted a snake, not only is determined to draw even its scales, but, eager to

[16] Dietrich Seckel, *The Art Of Buddhism*, Greystone, 1968, p. 276.

leave no detail untouched, at last gives his snake feet. For Taoism, painting feet on the snake is the blunder we make in life as in art.

The ideal is crystallized in the concept of p'u, literally, unpainted wood and, more broadly, everything plain, simple, and unadorned. Unspoiled innocence, natural, forthright, and unsophisticated, is to characterize all we do. In art the ideal is attained by way of tzu-jan: freedom embodied in creativity. "Making a picture," a fourteenth century treatise declares, "is nothing other than drawing one's inner spontaneity."[17] Early Taoism incorporated many beliefs of folk medicine on how to prolong life. Of more philosophic significance is the underlying reverence in Taoism for life in all its forms, an all-embracing sympathy with living things. Here again we see the philosophy of the country as contrasted with the city. There is dissolution in Taoism of any barriers separating man and nature, a recognition that man is part of nature, infused with it through and through. This sense of belonging to the great stream of universal life is visible, critics have noted, in all art inspired by Taoism.

Animals, birds, fish, and flowers are far more frequent subjects of Chinese painting than are human figures. Bird and flower paintings are a distinct category of art, admired and practiced more than any other save landscape. There is "no gleam of homo sapiens" in the plants and animals depicted, as though flowers were expressly created to decorate our homes, trees to shelter us, and horses and dogs to provide us companionship. [18] The Scriptural teaching that man was given by his Creator dominion over beast, fish, and fowl (*Genesis* 1:26, 28) is no part of Taoist perspectives. In Chinese art plants and animals are not merely physical presences, as is usual in Europe. They are invested with a profound mystique. Paintings with those subjects are called hsieh sheng, writing life', in contrast to a common designation for landscape, liu ying, 'leaving a shadow'. Inanimate nature is subordinated to the living, albeit not specifically to man.

Landscape remains an appropriate subject for painting, but only, an eleventh century painter named Kuo Hsi explains, "because it is the place where life is perpetually springing." The term 'inanimate nature' would be, in this metaphysics, virtually incomprehensible. Landscape paintings are rich in plant life and seldom without a human figure to

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[17] Ni Tsan, quoted in Joseph R. Levenson, *Modern China And Its Confucian Past,* Anchor, 1964, p. 51.

[18] Yee, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

put things into perspective, not a spatial perspective but a perspective on meaning and worth. The paintings are not of figures in a landscape, but of landscapes with figures.[19] Chinese landscape painting, it has been conjectured, originated in a religious desire to escape from the worldly life of human society into a state of spiritual freedom. They are paintings with the hermit's outlook, the lonely mountain-dweller. Such a life style, though associated especially with Taoism, is not unknown to Buddhism and Confucianism as well. The solitary, natural life has an appeal deeply rooted in Chinese culture. 'Escape' may not be the right word. The paintings do not create a dreamworld, nor does the way of life they express have in it any element of make-believe. The men who crave for the companionship of hills and stream do so, like Henry David Thoreau, because they are convinced that in such companionship the true life of man is to be found. "It is an escape, not from life, but to life."[20]

Chinese painting often expresses the delight that the Taoist takes in mountains, rocks, and rivers, in trees, flowers, fish, and birds, in the creatures of groves, fields, and forests, all leading the simple life to which he himself aspires. That is what the Taoist sees in nature. If nature does not imitate art, the perception of nature is surely shaped by art, as surely as art in turn is shaped by that perception. Essential to all life is its ceaseless motion, its shung tung, the continuous process of growth and decay. Life is a manifestation of the pervasive cosmic rhythm, chi yun, exhibited in the slow cycles of the stars as much as in the hurried pulses of blood and breath. Chinese design delights in movement as a manifestation both of life and of encompassing nature. The images of art are not depictions of instantaneous states but evocations of processes. The artist shows not how nature looks but how it works. In evoking the rhythms of life art itself comes to life.

Rhythm is a striking characteristic of Indian art also, especially Indian sculpture. In India all change is conceived as the manifestation in appearance of the unchanging substance that is the underlying reality. Indian art and culture emphasize what is solid and enduring; the Chinese "dwells on what is floating, undulating, airy."[21] Yet Chinese civilization has remained stable for millennia, changing, for the most part, only in externals. Chinese art embodies little of the western defi-

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[19] Binyon, *Spirit, op. cit.,* pp. 97, 102.
[20] *Ibid.,* p. 96.
[21] *Ibid.,* p. 62.

ant resistance of the natural processes of decay and the restless pursuit of progress. There are no Chinese painters of social protest, like the Mexican muralists Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco. Chinese culture is not for that reason to be perceived as stagnating in resignation. What appears as indifference to change is in reality an exaltation in sharing in the cosmic process, in being "a conscious part of the Protean life that streams and flows through all things."[22] Chinese art beats out a spiritual rhythm, shen yun, which the Chinese aspires to share as the pulse of his life. There is no rhythm without recurrence; it is because of the world's rhythms that the more it changes the more it is the same. A central teaching of Taoism is the pervasive Principle of the Return. Night follows day to bring a new dawn; the moon waxes and wanes; the seasons follow one another in endless cycles; so it is in the life of man. This is the doctrine expounded in the *I Ching*, appropriately called *The Book of Changes*. The theme is also familiar in Western culture. "One generation passes away and another comes," says Scripture (*Ecclesiastes* 1: 4-7). "The sun also rises and the sun goes down … The wind turns about continually in its circuit … Where the rivers go, they go again."

For the western thinker, the cycles teach the vanity of our wearisome toil. For Taoism, the Return is the guide to a meaningful life. "Reversal is the movement of the Tao," says Lao-tzu; "in Returning we see the mind of Heaven and earth." A familiar image in Chinese literature and art is that of crows day after day faithfully returning at dusk to their trees. The long voyage home, so common a theme in the west from Homer to Eugene O'Neill, would be foreign to the Chinese only in its being presented as a single sequence of events. For the Chinese the voyage is repeated over and over in the life of man, as it is repeated in living nature and in the entire cosmos. All that happens, happens again and again. The Taoist, like the Buddhist, is accepting of whatever comes. What he admires in nature is the patient and submissive, like the rock and bamboo, which on that account endures, while man rushes about, escaping nothing and achieving nothing. The Taoist acts by inaction, does all that need be done by non-doing. This active inaction is called wu wei; it is not passivity but the immovable irresistibility of mountains and water.

Only by inaction can man attain to peace of mind, or stillness, as the Chinese has it. "To the mind that is still," said Lao-tzu, "the whole

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 30

universe surrenders." Confucius noted that while the wise may take pleasure in the moving waters of rivers and lakes, the virtuous turn rather to the still mountains. If there is a choice, the Taoist prefers virtue to wisdom. Unmoved, silent, inactive, the Taoist is ever open to life. "The spirit is an emptiness ready to receive all things," said Chuang-tzu, after Lao-tzu the most influential Taoist. In the West we might say, when we are full of self, there is no room for God. We cannot be filled, fulfilled, until we are empty within. It is this emptiness, Lao-tzu points out, which makes pitchers and rooms of use. Emptiness is all we need aspire to; the rest comes of itself. Emptiness, space, hsu or kung, is the category that links Taoist metaphysics to art. All art selects and simplifies: the world is immeasurably richer than any representation of it. Taoist painting is noteworthy for its omissions. The artist is guided by the principle that a blank space is far better than a superfluous detail. The presence of large areas of empty space is the most outstanding characteristic of Chinese painting, especially of the later Sung Dynasty. A traditional description of such landscapes is: a remnant of mountain and a residue of water.

The empty space is not, because of its emptiness, devoid of meaning. "The idea is present even where the brush has not passed," says the classic *Mustard Seed Garden* treatise on painting. The idea that is present is that space is "a home of the liberated spirit, where it flows in the flowing of the Eternal Spirit; the universe is one unbounded whole."[23] In Chinese art space is not an all-encompassing crystalline substance, as it is in the paint of, say, Yves Tanguy and other surrealists. Taoist space is not substance but process, "an activity flowing out from the picture into our minds, and drawing us up into a rarer atmosphere."[24] Such space has been aptly described as a "spiritual solid."[25] Taoist space is not only spiritualized; it is extended to the farthest reaches of the spirit. Chinese painting is largely of vast expanses; seldom are interiors depicted or scenes close to the observer's eye. This is not simply because the power of nature can best be represented by far stretches of water and mountains. The focus on depth and distance might be said to express "a craving for the infinite."[26]

The lack of perspective in Taoist landscape stems from the same aspiration. The infinite totality lies beyond any possibility of full

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[23] Binyon, *Spirit, op. cit.,* p. 76.
[24] *Ibid.,* p. 98.
[25] Mai-Mai Sze, *The Way Of Chinese Painting,* Random House, 1959, p. 110.
[26] Binyon, *Flight*, *op. cit.,* p. 81.

expression; every complete statement is necessarily finite in content. Spinoza, similarly pre-occupied with the infinite, declared that all definition is negation. Islamic art, too, eschews completeness: in all Islamic architecture something is left unfinished, because perfection belongs only to Allah. For Taoism, man cannot even grasp perfection, to say nothing of producing it. An eighth century Chinese aesthetician, Wang Wei, explains that the eye can see only the limits, but not the whole thing. Taoist painting carries us to the very edge of things: we ourselves must make the leap into the unseen totality. If we are to see the unseen, we must leap while standing still, by not doing. The Taoist listens, not for the thunderous silence of Zen, but for the endless reverberations of stillness. There is a Chinese saying about poetry: the sound stops short, the sense flows on. The same applies to Taoist painting. The picture continues to take shape after the brush has stopped. What is seen overflows into the unseen, what is filled flows into emptiness. If we can step into the picture, we will wander freely, like Chuang-tzu, alone in the kingdom of the great void. "In that state which is neither speech nor silence," Chuang-tzu said, "the Tao may be apprehended." Taoist painting speaks to us in silences.

VIII

An emphasis on spirit is common to all three strands of Chinese thought. In none of them is moral idealism grounded in a metaphysical dualism with spirit conceived as wholly disjoined from and opposed to matter. There is in China no attempt to elevate the spirit by degrading matter, mortifying the flesh for the sake of the soul. Close to the Chinese ethos is Martin Buber's dictum that physical nature is not an obstacle on the road to the Eternal Thou; it is the road itself. Chinese aesthetics in both theory and practice is no more dualistic than is its metaphysics. There has been in China no iconoclastic controversy, no hostility to art on the ground that it appeals to the senses. Chinese art may be sensuous; it is decidedly not sensual. Its colors are delicate, its forms restrained; there is in it nothing brazenly voluptuous. Art can reach us, however, only through the senses. A Japanese haikku runs:

> Plum-blossoms in the spring –––
> Really to know them, one's own heart . . .
> But one's own nose, too!

Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist would all concur.

Aesthetics based on metaphysical idealism, from Plato to Benedetto Croce, views matter as serving only to give duration to the artist's idea, itself timeless, and to allow the artist to communicate his idea, which, though itself impersonal, he personally has grasped. Romanticism replaces the understanding mind by a feeling heart. Neither sort of idealism recognizes that there can be no art unless some matter is transformed. Such transformation, the Chinese say, reveals heart and hand in accord. The Chinese are not romantics or metaphysical idealists; neither are they metaphysical materialists. Matter is neither nothing at all nor all in all. It is an instrumentality. Spiritual ends require material means. Yin needs yang for completeness. Another Chinese saying is that the spirit lives in the point of the brush. The saying originally referred to calligraphy; it may be applied to all of the arts and to the moral and religious life as well.

When the ends that matter serves are those of art, matter becomes a medium. As medium, matter plays an important part in Chinese aesthetics. Materials like silk, lacquer, and jade are enough in themselves to point unmistakably to Chinese art. Other materials, though common elsewhere too, in their most artistic forms are recognized as characteristically Chinese; fine pottery is called simply 'china'. The classical Chinese would regard as barbaric any society for which the medium has become the message. Yet in every civilization both the form and content of art are deeply affected by the media employed. The medium delimits a range of possibilities and invites some responses more than others. Art chooses its medium because of these possibilities and the expected responses to them. The ancient Egyptians, pre-occupied with an everlasting life after death, carved in diorite, one of the hardest and hence most enduring forms of granite. Modern architecture and the arts of design, like those of the Bauhaus, are unthinkable without reinforced concrete, steel, aluminum, glass, and plastics and were almost inevitable once those materials became readily available.

All artistry rests on craftsmanship. Skill is needed to transform materials so as to enrich the spirit; the greater the enrichment, the greater the skill demanded. An often repeated expression of admiration in China for a skillful painter is that he can give the effect of ten thousand miles of country on a fan. In China skill seldom becomes an end in itself, a vulgar display of virtuosity. The tools of the craft and the state of the art are recognized to be largely a cultural heritage, not an individual achievement. The artist respects his materials and almost

reveres his tools, much as the Zen monk bows to his tatami before sitting upon it to perform the zazen meditation. Brush, ink, inkstone, and paper are called the Four Treasures of the room of literature. It is said of a certain collector of ink-sticks that "every New Year he would range them out in his studio, drink wine to them, then kneel down to worship them."[27] It is unlikely that his behavior was thought to be extravagant or foolish.

The relation of art to religion lies deeper than is revealed in the exploitation of art for religious instruction, for strengthening or propagating the faith. The relation is intrinsic to the process of artistic creation. In all cultures the power to create is thought to derive from the creator or from a creative principle in the cosmos. The artist can do little without the inspiration of the muse. Chinese classify artists as merely accomplished (neng), profound or mysterious (miao), or, highest of all, divine (shen). A widespread cross-cultural myth sees the artist as selling his soul in exchange for supernatural artistic powers, as in Thomas Mann's version of the legend of Dr. Faustus or in popular beliefs about the nineteenth century violin virtuoso, Niccolo Paginini. The old Chinese term for painting is ishu, literally, magic skill. The great artist is nothing less than a magician, in China as in other cultures. The magic may not be devoted to artistic ends. Display of the artist's virtuosity is one alternative; the skill of the juggler has no other end. Another alternative is to exploit the artist's skill only to titillate the senses; art then degenerates into mere decoration. In Western art decadence tends to show itself in the slavishly academic, in moral or political didacticism, or else in surrender to sentimentality or subjectivity. Chinese decadence is a matter of emptiness, fluency for its own sake, with neither an artistic content nor an ancillary one.

By and large, however, the Chinese artist maintains his artistic integrity. Even the most extreme artists seek a meaning beyond the emptiness of pure form, the superficiality of decorativeness, and the immaturity of sheer self-affirmation. At the very least, an established iconography gives symbolic content to details of color, composition, subject matter, and shape. Chinese art is preserved from decadence by the enduring centrality for the artist of nature rather than of a self-contained artistic tradition. There are painters who take the old masters as teachers, said the aesthetician Shih-Lung, but whoever wants to make forward stride himself must choose heaven and earth as

[27] Yee, *op. cit.,* p. 200.

teachers. The need to do so is especially marked with regard to portraits. There are standard forms, fixed by tradition, for painting mountains, rivers, grasses, trees, birds, beasts, fish, and insects, but there is no manual for portraiture.

The Chinese expression for 'portrait' is chuan shen, which means literally to transmit spirit. The spirit dies in captivity; it cannot be housed in any cage, however gilded, prepared for it in advance. Flowers and plants are always depicted in their natural settings. Still life is not a category of Chinese paining; for the Chinese that expression, like inanimate nature, is a contradiction in terms. Emphasis on nature can readily degenerate to a superficial realism. This did not happen in China. There is no trompe l'oeil painting, no cultivation of illusion. Hsun-tzu, leader of one of the two great wings of Confucian philosophy, said of art that it is a matter of deceiving ourselves without being deceived, a formulation reminiscent of Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief. Art is not so indistinguishable from actuality that disbelief does not even cross our minds.

There is a story of two Greek painters, Zeuxis and Polycrates, who staged a competition with regard to the realism of their pictures. On the appointed day one drew aside the curtain hanging over his work, revealing a painting of a bowl of fruit, so realistic that a fly that had been buzzing about landed at one of the simulated fruits. Turning to his rival he said triumphantly, "Now draw your curtain!" The reply was, "It is painted on." This could not have happened in China. As the eleventh century aesthetician, Ou-yang Hsiu, pointed out, the Chinese paint I, the idea, not hsing, the mere outer appearance. So did the Greeks before decadence set in. Mimesis is not imitation in the sense of realism; for Aristotle, music, the most abstract art, is also the most mimetic. Art everywhere aims at catching the spirit of its subject, not at producing copies of appearances. This is supremely true of Chinese art. Like the art of Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Goya, it is shadowy but does not trouble itself about shadows, misty but showing not a trace of vagueness, evocative but never obscure. The great artist may be a magician; he is not an illusionist.

He is a creator. The Chinese have many legends paralleling the myth of Pygmalion, in his statue's coming to life, not in his falling in love with his own creation. It is said of the sixth century painter, Chang Seng-yu, that he painted two dragons on a wall but left out their eyes; persuaded to complete the picture, he painted in the eyes of one of them, which thereupon rose from the wall and in a clap of thunder

burst through the roof. Another artist, when a boy, was bound to a post; with his toe he drew in the dust a mouse, so instinct with life that the mouse gnawed the boys bonds and set him free. Of Wu Tao-tzu, the great painter of the T'ang Dynasty, it was told that his figures walked out of his pictures and back into them. It was said of him that some deity must have borrowed his hand. The true artist, like the righteous man of *Kabbalah*, is in the work of creation a partner of the gods.

VIII

The artist ranks high in Chinese culture; art is not thought of, however, as basically a vehicle of self-expression. Expressiveness rather than self-expression is the key category of Chinese aesthetics, an expressiveness that takes the artist as well as the viewer out of themselves into the limitless world of the Tao. Not the painter but what he presents is the important thing. The artist aims always at chi-yun: consonance with the spirit of the subject matter of his artistry. This is the first of the six canons of painting. The motto of the Ming painters might serve for all: spirit flashing in to the mind. To attain this consonance the artist must absorb himself in his subject. The principle was formulated in the T'ang Dynasty by Wang Wei: "use your intuition more than your brush." To paint bamboos an artist might sit in the bamboo grove for days before actually painting. Another painter, Shih-ch'i, says that he can paint landscapes only if he converses with the mountains. Until the artist's subject speaks to him, there is no use in his beginning to paint.

The expression for landscape painting, mountain-water picture, it has been remarked, suggests that what is depicted is a living organism, the mountains being its flesh and the streams its blood.[28] If the artist cannot enter into conversation with his scene, at least there must be a silent communion between them and between the landscape and the figures in it. "A figure should seem to be contemplating the mountain," says the *Mustard Seed Garden* manual of painting; "the mountain, in turn, should seem to be bending over and watching the figure." In another passage the manual explains, "There are not many secret methods in the painting of rocks. To sum it up in a phrase, rocks must

[28] Binyon, *Spirit, op. cit.*, p. 82.

be alive." The landscape painter Kuo Hsi said simply, "A landscape is a place where … springs and rocks play about like children."

Chinese artists, critics. and aestheticians all lean heavily on metaphor in talking of pictures. The picture itself might be said to be a metaphor on silk. An ancient saying runs: poetry is a picture without form, painting is a poem with form. The saying is sometimes rendered as: a voiceless poem … a vocal picture. Landscape painting in particular is decidedly poetic. There is in it no romantic nostalgia, however, as is usual in western idealized landscapes. Kuo Hsi calls mountains beautiful using, I am told, the word generally applied to women. In both cases, the beauty is perceived as an objective quality transcending a personal emotional response, as the scene transcends the perspectives of a particular time and place. In Chinese painting the local becomes cosmic, conveying "hints of the infinite, … powers and presences mightier than ourselves,"[29] and suggesting an "eternity which, like the mist into which he gazes, swallows man up. "[30] The Chinese artist thereby takes on the mantle of the prophet. "The ancients said that a painter was a holy man," writes Han Cho in a twelfth century treatise on landscape painting. "Thus he fathoms the uttermost secrets of heaven and earth and illumines what is not lit by sun and moon." He does this by what William Wordsworth called the light that never was on sea or land. For the Hebrews, the heavens proclaim the glory of God (Psalm 19:2); for the Chinese, it is art that shows His handiwork.

There is a limit to what the artist can do: the viewer also must be touched by the finger of prophecy. A work of art is not complete until the viewer's own imagination has done its work, not just his imagination, but also his intellect, feelings, moral sensibility, all that makes up the human spirit. It is not enough to look at the picture; we must step into it. "There are landscapes in which one can travel, landscapes in which one may gaze, landscapes in which one may ramble, and landscapes in which one may dwell," wrote Kuo Hsi; "any painting which reveals one of these is in the category of the excellent." There is a legend about Wu Tao-tzu that embodies this standard of excellence. Wu Tao-tzu was commissioned by the emperor to paint a picture on a wall of one of the rooms of the palace. When he had finished he displayed the work before the emperor. It was a vast landscape; streams flowed

[29] Binyon, *Painting, op. cit*., p. 24.
[30] Andre Malraux, *Psychology of Art*, 1949, Vol. II, P. 162.

down from the peaks, trees on the lower slopes reached toward heaven, and in the valley, beneath the stillness, all was pulsing with life. As the fascinated emperor gazed on the scene, the painter said to him: "At the foot of this mountain is a cave; within it are scenes of umimaginable beauty. Permit me to show you the way." So saying, he stepped into the wall. Before the astonished eyes of the emperor the painting slowly faded away; he was left starring at the blank wall. Wu Tao-tzu was never seen again.

WATER AND STONE: ON THE ROLE OF EXPRESSION IN CHINESE ART

Mary Bittner Wiseman

> "Chinese art emphasizes 'expression', while western art pays more attention to 'reproduction'. So Chinese art stresses the creator's perception, understanding and feelings of life."[1]

While emptiness, for example, is a value important in Chinese aesthetics but virtually absent from its western counterpart, expression is a value important in both. However, what is expressed in each is radically different, so different that when we explore its place in Chinese art, we get a privileged glance both into a tradition older and unlike any in the west and into a culture emerging from the rapid and far-reaching changes that have been occurring in China over the past several decades. The changes raise questions about what in the new China is irreducibly Chinese, questions tied to those raised by the phenomenon of globalization: what is local in any culture, what in it resists becoming global, what is irreducibly of that culture? The changes suggest that the way to track the Chinese concept of expression is not so much to compare its roles in classical Chinese and western art as to compare them in classical art theory and contemporary Chinese art. I track the concept through art rather than literature because western audiences are apt to be more familiar with the art of China than with its literature and because the high-voltage energy fueling the contemporary art scene in China is being expended in the creation of works of visual art.

A look at the experimental art being made by Chinese artists in the light of classical Chinese theory of art demonstrates two things: first, that the current art exemplifies the six techniques of painting laid out by Hsieh Ho in the fifth century—hence its Chineseness—and, second, that the new art celebrates the materiality of the world, reigning as it does at the level of the body and its gestures, which is the level at which

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[1] Shuyang Su, *A Reader on China: An Introduction to China's history, culture, and civilization* (Shanghai: Shanghai Press and Publishing Company, 2005), p. 196.

matter and energy interact. To show this I am going to discuss two classical writings, one contemporary essay, and two contemporary exhibitions. The classical works are Hsieh Ho's fifth century *Six Principles of Chinese Painting* and Shih-t'ao's seventeenth century *An Expressionist Credo*. Contemporary are "The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art," an essay by David Clarke in *Art Journal* (Winter 2006) and *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China*, a 2007 exhibition at Tate Liverpool. The enterprise promises three rewards.

First, the discovery of the Chinese conception of expression in art can teach us about traditional and current Chinese views of what art is and what it does, while the application of the discovered concept to our own art can enrich our appreciation and understanding of it. Moreover, so far as the concept captures something essential to the art of China, it can trace a line from the classical tradition, through the exposure to western modernization in the first half of the twentieth century and art's subsequent restriction to celebrating communist ideology after 1949, to the increasing freedom from that restriction and the exposure to western post-modernism after 1979. Second, on the assumption that not everything in the Chinese concept is applicable to western art, the discovery of what it is in our art that resists the concept's full application will begin to unearth fault lines between the arts of the two cultures. Third, through our engagement with the work of Chinese artists to which we have access through the global art world, we test both our capacity to make our own what comes from a different culture and art's capacity to transcend the ethos of the place of its birth. In short, we test our ability to assimilate what erstwhile had been the other and art's ability to expatriate. This sense of the difference between what we can readily respond to and what strikes us as other heightens our sense of what is distinctive in Chinese art.

The artworld in China from the time of the nation's invitation in 1979 to foreign investment and ideas up to the present has been changing so rapidly that no one style has had a chance to take root or take hold of artists' imaginations. Limited by no genres or styles, the artists are open to influence from what other artists are doing throughout the wired world—which will soon be the whole world—and from the international exhibitions to which Chinese artists are increasingly being invited. Moreover, avant-garde artists in China are wielding ever more influence worldwide as the number of overseas exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art grows. This is why and how the art of a

culture can reach out to the arts of other cultures. China's historical situation, in particular, the current exponential growth of capitalism there, makes the work of its artists more nearly global than that of other countries. Allow that 'local' and 'global' describe a gamut along which artworks are one or the other in varying degrees and that there might be none that are wholly one or the other. Call art local when it is so marked by its place as not to be able to shake off the marks. It is an art that people from other cultures could not have created and audiences from elsewhere could hardly understand or engage.[2] Because such art resists its viewers, it strikes them as other. Artworks are global when they can travel and non-native viewers can respond to them readily enough to be able to appreciate them. Global artworks need not be free of all traces of their origin, however. It is necessary only that its viewers do not have to be conversant with the culture whose ethos the works express in order to be able to engage them. China's artworld includes both the relatively local Peking Opera, for example, to which westerners tend not to respond and the global works of its avant-garde to which they do.

We can still ask whether there is anything irreducibly Chinese in the work of contemporary artists, the question being driven by the suspicion that since Chinese art has a stronger global thrust than many other arts, it is not especially Chinese. This need not be so. The global appeal of contemporary Chinese art could as well rest on China and its culture becoming more familiar to the rest of the world thanks to the worldwide web and the growing ease of travel. The weakest sense is in which a work can be Chinese is when it is created by a native Chinese artist but has no characteristics we would identify as especially Chinese. The strongest sense is when the work is accessible only to a native or near native. Most works fall between these extremes. The point important for us is that the quest for the Chinese concept of expression is not undercut by global influences at work and the fact that international audiences are attracted by the current work of Chinese artists.

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[2] Stephen Davies has argued for aesthetic universals on the ground that our common human nature gives us access, albeit at times quite limited, to the arts of other cultures. His point can be accommodated by calling arts that are easy of access to anyone 'global,' and arts that are not, 'local,' allowing that there are degrees of each. His point is that little there is that is so local as to refuse access to any but natives of its place of origin.

Appreciation of the role expression plays in classical Chinese art gives us a lens through which to look at contemporary work. This is a welcome help because the practice, criticism, and theory of art in post-Mao China is not easy to fit into the history of art in China up to and including art made in the spirit of Mao's 1942 "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art." It is not easy because artists—especially those born during or after the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976—are making art that asks what art is and what they as Chinese men and women are in a world in which the protagonists of the Cold War, communism and capitalism, coexist on their doorstep and in which China assumes an increasingly large role in the play of the world. The art historian Norman Bryson observed that given this tension, the quest for a Chinese identity has to go on below the level of the disparate discourses of either of these systems, political and economic, that is to say, at the level of the body and its gestures.[3] We shall see that the rhythmic vitality of the Chinese classical painter is the effect of the work of the brush, the ink, and the wrist, not of a decision that can be articulated, no matter how rich the critical discourse. It will turn out that the new art is the expression of a robust materialism, a replay of the robust regard in which the natural world, the earth and its heavens, its water and stone, was held by the classical painters and poets. This respectful materialism is the legacy of the heirs of China's classical tradition, despite its politicization in the hands of Mao.

Expression

It is appropriate at the outset to say something about the concept of expression. I assume that the idea of expression is more or less the same in Chinese and western aesthetics and that the primary difference between its appearance in the arts of each lies in the nature of what is expressed and the importance of its expression in art to the culture. Two western accounts of expression—the high analytic one of Monroe Beardsley and the more catholic one of Rudolf Arnheim—will provide a conceptual map on which to locate theories adumbrated or presupposed by the texts to be examined.[4]

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[3] Norman Bryson, "The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 57.

[4] Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981) Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and*

Few would deny that expression is a relation, whose minimal formulation, and I here follow Beardsley, is "an artwork expresses a psychological state or quality."[5] Limiting what is expressed to mental attitudes or activities implies agency, which inclines us to rewrite the formula as 'someone expresses a psychological state through a work of art.' Beardsley objects that on two natural readings of this, it either requires too much to verify it or tells us too little. If it means that the artist felt, say, joy when she made her work, then to determine its truth we would have to know what the artist was feeling while she was working. Since we rarely have independent evidence about an artist's state of mind, this strategy does not work. If, on the other hand, 'the artist expresses joy through a given work' means that she was causally responsible for the existence of the work, it tells us nothing beyond the fact that the artist made it. Yet this objection to a common reading of 'a work of art expresses thus and so' does not touch expression in traditional Chinese art, where the desired relation among artist, artwork, and what the work expresses is a harmony or oneness foreign to western thought.

Beardsley continues with a second reading in which the formula is taken to mean that when a viewer says of a work that it expresses joy, she means that she feels joy when she looks at it. But she can as well have said that the work arouses joy in her. 'Express' is redundant, as it is in a third reading, in which joy is not what either artist or viewer feels in their engagements with the art object but is what resides in the object itself. But we can then say that the work is joyous and do not need 'express.' I am reminded of Harvard professor Donald Williams' counter to Wittgenstein's claim that if something is a duck you cannot say it is like a duck. Williams asked 'what's more like a duck than a duck?' In this vein, he would say to Beardsley 'What better expresses joy than something that is joyful?'

A final complication of Beardsley's bare bones 'an artwork expresses a psychological state or quality' is the inclusion of the way in which expression is achieved in an artwork. The statement becomes: 'something is expressed by someone in some way through some medium or other.' How the artist's brush and wrist are held in classical Chinese painting determines the quality of the stroke, and in Chinese ink

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Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye, the new version. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

[5] Beardsley's arguments are directed against the expression theory of meaning in music, but they apply to visual art as well because it too is non-discursive.

painting and its cousin, calligraphy, the stroke is what is expressive. The lines of dripped paint in Jackson Pollack's drip paintings are also expressive, and the distinctive way in which they were made is one of the causes of the paintings' power. So it is with Titian's layers of transparent glazes, Seurat's dots, Van Gogh's short, thick paint strokes, Picasso's pasted-on pieces of newspaper and other odds and ends. They all contribute to the expressive power of the paintings they compose. How or why does the way the paintings are made contribute to their power? It has to do as much with the artist's body, with the movements made by his fingers, hand, wrist, arm, as with his feelings or intentions.

In *Art and Visual Perception*, Rudolph Arnheim says in discussing the dynamic qualities of what we see that part of the reason nature is alive to our eyes is that "its shapes are fossils of the events that gave rise to them."[6] We can extend this to artworks and say that they too are alive to our eyes when they display the history of the painters' movements that gave rise to them. But—and here is where Arnheim makes his singular contribution—we do not infer the past history of a work of nature or art from clues, but directly experience it "as forces and tensions present and active" in the objects' visible shapes.[7] It is not because we can imagine Pollack making the paint dance as he pours it onto canvases lying on his studio's floor that his drip paintings are perceived as interplays of tension-heightening and tension-reducing forces, but because the forces are "present and active" in the paintings themselves.[8] Arnheim claims that all traditional theories of expression deny what he avows, namely, that there is an intrinsic connection "between perceived appearance and the expression it conveyed."[9] His account of expression in art is broader than any other.

The narrowest view of expression is that only things with minds can express. A broader one is that objects, trees and rocks alike, can be seen to express, but only on analogy with our experiences. Theodor Lipps, the theorist of empathy, gave this explanation of how we can find expression in the inanimate columns of a temple. Arnheim describes Lipps' position: "When I look at the columns I know from past experience the kind of mechanical pressure and counter-pressure that occurs in them. Equally from past experience, I know how I

[6] Arnheim, p. 417.
[7] Arnheim, p. 417.
[8] Arnheim, p. 411.
[9] Arnheim, p. 448.

should feel myself if I were in the place of the columns and if those physical forces acted upon and within my own body."[10] More generally, and in the words of Lipps, "When I project my strivings and forces into nature I do so also as to the way my strivings and forces make me feel, that is, I project my pride, my courage, my stubbornness, my lightness, my playful assuredness, my tranquil complacence. Only thus my empathy with regard to nature becomes truly aesthetic empathy."[11]

The viewer infers from her own experience of what it is like to bear such a weight that so it is for the columns to bear the weight. Only then can the columns be said to express the tension caused by the pressures and counter-pressures acting on it. Few there are, however, who acknowledge how much what the columns express "depends on the particular dynamic qualities of the percept," not on the memories and imagination of the perceiver.[12] Here is where we are the moment before Arnheim steps onto the stage with his rich account of visual perception.

Since the Enlightenment the perceptible qualities of physical objects are routinely divided into those independent of the viewer—the primary qualities of size, shape, number, position, and motion—and those not independent—the secondary qualities of color, sound, touch, taste, and smell. The perception of sensory qualities is a function of the way the object's primary qualities impinge on the perceiver's sense organs; the primary qualities and the perceiver's sense organs cooperate. This view has created a bias in favor of an object's measurable qualities over its sensory ones, and Arnheim observes that we are apt to think that having measured an object and perhaps included its color and texture, we have fairly described all we see, using only qualities that are static and subjective—subjective because sensory qualities depend on how perceiving subjects are affected by the motions of the sense-quality-free molecules of which physical objects are composed.

Arnheim's thesis is that objects have dynamic qualities and "visual perception consists in the experiencing of visual forces."[13] The forces are best thought of as directed tensions and are to be sought in the object itself. A few simple examples will have to suffice to argue the

[10] Arnheim, p. 448.
[11] Arnheim, p. 448.
[12] Arnheim, p. 448,
[13] Arnheim, p. 412.

point that we directly see dynamic qualities and do not infer them from our experience. His claim is that "every visual object is eminently a dynamic affair" and that this is overlooked because we are in the habit of giving metric descriptions of, for example, an equilateral triangle, reds and oranges side by each on a canvas, and any movement.[14] Described statically they are, respectively, three equal straight lines meeting each other at angles of 60 degrees; wavelengths of 700 and 610 milli-microns; and an object moving at a certain speed in a certain direction. These descriptions fail to include what we actually experience, however, which is "the primary quality of all perception, [namely,] the aggressive outward pointing of the triangle, the dissonant clash of the hues, the onrush of the movement."[15]

I end this recital of the views of Beardsley and Arnheim on aesthetic expression with the words of two artists. T. S. Eliot said of a Chinese jar: "it moves perpetually in its stillness." Leonardo Da Vinci said of any painted figure absent this quality of motion that it is "doubly dead, since it is dead because it is a figment and dead again when it shows movement neither of the mind or of the body."[16] The classical Chinese painter following the first principle laid out by Hsieh Ho in the fifth century would make two telling additions. One is that a whole work is dead if it fails to move perpetually in its stillness and the other, that it is dead when it shows no movement, not only of the mind or the body, but also of the heaven and earth and its water and stone. What the additions can tell us can be gleaned from the two historical texts to which I now turn.

Hsieh Ho, The Six Principles of Painting (5th century)

In the late fifth century, Hsieh Ho wrote a book called *Criticism of Painting* in which he listed six technical factors of painting and said of them that few artists mastered them all. He then ranked twenty-seven artists into six grades, depending on which techniques they mastered and how well. The importance of the paragraph in which he lists the factors cannot be underestimated. In *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art* (Putnam, 1967), Lin Yutang called it the most influential paragraph ever written on Chinese art

[14] Arnheim, p. 412.
[15] Arnheim, p. 412.
[16] Arnheim, p. 413.

and identified the first technique as the one undisputed goal of art in China.[17]

Here are the techniques as Hsieh Ho described them: "The first is: Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement. The second is: Bone Manner (structural) Use of the Brush. The third is: Conform with the Objects (to obtain) Likeness. The fourth is: Apply the Colors According to the Characteristics. The fifth is: Plan and Design, Place and Position (i.e. composition). The sixth is: To Transmit Models by Drawing," that is, to copy the master.[18] And here is their rendering by a critic who flourished in the mid-ninth century, Chang Yen-yuan, of whom Lin Yutang said that we owe our knowledge of ancient Chinese art history more than to anyone else.[19] Chang Yen-tuan wrote: "Hsieth Ho in ancient times said: 'What are the six techniques? First, creating a life-like tone and atmosphere; second, building structure through brush-work; third, depicting the forms of things as they are; fourth, appropriate colouring; fifth, composition; and sixth, transcribing and copying'."[20]

The six are given in decreasing order of importance, where the sixth, "to transmit models by drawing," is different in status from the others. Copying is something commonly done in order to learn the technical side of the art, yet no artist can master the all-important first principle, capture the painted subject's 'spirit resonance and life movement,' simply by copying works that display it. By the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644 art was for the most part limited to slavish imitation of the styles of the ancients, and this state of affairs inspired the revolutionary expressionist credo of the artist Shih-t'ao, to be discussed below.

The first canon can be read as specifying what is to be expressed in works of art. 'Express' is a transitive verb so that in all cases of expression there is something that is expressed. It is the resonance of spirit and movement of life of the subject of the work. This is not all that a work can express, however. The artist perforce expresses the spirit of

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[17] Hsieh Ho, "The Six Techniques of Painting" in Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art* (New York: G. F. Putnam's Sons, 1967).

[18] Osvald Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Texts by the Painter-Critics from the Han through the Ch'ing Dynasties* (Peiping, 1936; rpt. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), p. 19.

[19] Lin Yutang, p. 43.

[20] Lin Yutang, p. 51.

the subject in some way, and his hand or heart or mind shows through the work, to be expressed in and by the work. And not every work is successful in capturing what has also been translated as its subject's 'tone and atmosphere,' but no work can be great if it does not.

Can we find a counterpart in the art of the west to Chinese works that satisfy the first canon? A possible candidate is the lifelikeness valued in the Renaissance when, for example, it might be said of a human figure that it seemed to be alive and to lack nothing but breath itself. But this will not do. First, the figure is said only to look as though it were alive and possessed of *sheng-tung* (life movement), but not to look as though it were marked by *ch'i-yun* (spirit resonance), the spirit that pulses through the universe. Yet the first canon requires both. Second, the quality is predicated of a figure in the Renaissance painting and not of the painting itself. Better, the lifelikeness is a property emergent upon the artist's satisfying what the third canon bids him to do, "conform with the objects (to obtain) likeness."

Titian, for example, painted many a female nude. Oil paint was put to woven canvas so as to "conform with the female nude (to obtain) likeness."[21] The sense of lifelikeness comes from the qualities conveyed by the paint itself, which is applied in transparent layers that seem to glow, creating the impression of warm, moist, living flesh. Titian is a genius of color and light, not of line, not of "bone manner in the structural use of the brush," the second principle. He paints light as various textures—of skin, hair, silk, glass, metal, trees, sky, clouds—variously reflect it and as light probes the colors to reach the primary colors of which all others are composed. Titian's use of light and color to capture the lifelikeness of the female nude is not an example of capturing the resonance and life movement of his subject. What he captures is not the spirit that pulses through all there is, but woman-ness. Because of the female body's role in producing human beings, we can say that he captures human-ness. What Titian paints is matter-made-human.

Might there be a western counterpart to the satisfaction of the second canon (building structure through brush work)? Osvald Siren calls the structural brushwork of the Chinese painter the backbone and life-nerve of his art, qualities whose importance cannot be exaggerated.[22] The ninth century critic Chang Yen-yuan, the first inter-

[21] In doing so, Titian obeys the third principle of Chinese classical art, which is to conform with the objects (to obtain) likeness.

[22] Siren, p. 20.

preter of the six canons, said of the importance of the vital spirit and the brush of the first and second canons, respectively, that he who produces a picture "through the concentration of his spirit creates a real picture … In real pictures every brush stroke reveals life. He who deliberates and moves the brush intent upon making a picture, misses to a still greater extent the art of painting, while he who cogitates and *moves the brush without any intention of making a picture*, reaches the art of painting"[23] (Emphasis added.). What this says is that the expression of the vital spirit is the effect of the brushstroke and that the effectiveness of the brushstroke is a function of the state of mind of the artist. What a successful work reveals is the vital spirit, the tone and atmosphere, of the universe and everything in it. For the artist each thing does what Gerard Manley Hopkins describes as 'flinging forth its name.' It is but for the artist to listen and to let himself hear and feel the rhythmic vitality, the life, of all things. Better said, the artist expresses the resonance that the vitality of the universe sets up in him as the vitality enters him in such a way that he "moves the brush without any intention of making a picture." He becomes, as it were, a medium for what, through his hand and brush, he transmits to the paper.

The just-discussed quotation from Chang Yen-yuan is said by Siren to capture what was said over and over by the ancient philosophers, whether Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist: "To understand the meaning or significance of a thing, one must become the thing, harmonize one's consciousness with it and reach the mental attitude that brings knowledge without intellectual deliberation."[24] A two-pronged difference between Chinese and western aesthetics is adumbrated in these words, one that turns on the tendency of the west to draw boundaries between kinds of things and inquiries and of the east to seek oneness among the things and inquiries the west separates. The disciplines of philosophy, religion, and aesthetics separated out from each other in the

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[23] Siren, pp. 230-231.

[24] Siren, p. 24. Also from Siren: "Or, in the words of Confucius: 'He who is in harmony with Nature hits the mark without effort and apprehends the truth without thinking'. The attitude is exactly the same as the Taoist idea of the identity of the subjective and the objective. 'Only the truly intelligent understand this principle of identity. They do not view things as apprehended by themselves subjectively, but transfer themselves into the position of the things viewed. And viewing them thus they are able to comprehend them, nay, to master them; and he who can master them is near. So it is, to place oneself in subjective relation with externals, without consciousness of their objectivity, this is Tao'," pp. 24–25.

course of time in the west, but not in the east. This is the first prong of the difference. The second is that human beings are one with nature, with heaven and earth, in the worldview of the east, while they are deeply different in kind from nature in the framework laid out by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the subsequent philosophers who are their heirs. As they understand it, humans alone have reason and this, it is supposed, gives them power over nature together with the authority to exercise the power. The most dramatic difference between humankind and the rest of the universe in the western worldview stems from the monotheism inherited from the Jews. In human beings alone are shadowed forth the powers of judgment and will possessed by the God who created them in his image: hence, their uniqueness.

Returning to the question of whether there are western artworks that satisfy any of Hsieh Ho's principles, we see that not until the appearance of Impressionism do we find anything comparable to the attention to the brushwork of the second canon. With Impressionism comes the focus both on modern life, rather than on events from the classical world, the Bible, or history, and on how things are perceived, how they appear to the eye alone, absent interference from the mind. The strokes and daubs and dots of paint, the work of the brush, captured the light and life of the times and places the Impressionists painted. The paint did the work, not the figures that emerged from the painted surface. In a Titian nude, oil paint substitutes for flesh, whereas in an Impressionist painting, bodies, objects, sky, and sea just are daubs of colored paint. Colors and shapes are all that we see in the world, as they are all that is there on the canvas. In a similar way, in a Chinese painting, the mountains just are the lines the brush made. The brush strokes are the mountain's bones. In Impressionist art, color and paint do more of the work than they do in traditional Chinese art, but in both the brush stroke itself matters more than it does in pre-Impressionist art.

Paul Cezanne formalized the paint strokes, making his painted mountains and towns out of cubes, planes, and blotches of paint. Even the portrait of his dead wife, she who, Arthur Danto noted, had aroused such passions in him, was reduced to the geometry of painted shapes. The power of the paint itself subsides in Cubism, a natural place for Cezanne's blocky lines to go, but Surrealism appeared and exemplified the Chinese idea that spontaneity is a necessary condition for achieving the art of painting. In Surrealism neither Impressionism's perceiving eye nor Cezanne's geometrizing hand holds sway. The

unconscious does. But what the unconscious mind governs and what, therefore, is spontaneous is what is painted, not the manner in which it is painted. The painted subjects are as fully and deliberately articulated as are both the dreams reconstructed by the patient on the psychoanalyst's couch and the canvases of Titian.

Not until Abstract Expressionism does the focus on the spontaneous deployment of the brush equal that of the Chinese artist. But with this difference, which is all the difference. The western painter expresses himself, his angels and demons alike. Thanks to the Second World War, the art center of the western world had moved to New York, a city whose artists did not have in their past what the European had—hundreds of years of art history and the direct experience of the modernizing movements of the twentieth century that traveled westward from Russia to Germany. This European history did not stand in the American artists' way of making art in a world turned upside down by the totalitarian regimes whose values were inimical to their own. Even in America, whose troops fought only on foreign soil in the World War, the one safe place seemed to be within the individual, in a place deeper than reason, whose moorings had been loosed by the debacles of the first half of the century.

What does it mean to say the Abstract Expressionist expressed himself? The historical conditions just outlined were no doubt necessitating conditions. Thrown back on themselves as they were, the artists could do little more than what the Tang critic Chang Yen-yuan said the good artist does, namely, create a real picture in which every brush stroke reveals life, through the concentration of his spirit. The artist "who cogitates and moves the brush without any intention of making a picture, reaches the art of painting."[25] If we understand the ideas of concentrating the spirit and cogitating as, say, the artist's shutting out the world and listening to himself, then the acts of painting of Jackson Pollack and Willem DeKooning are captured by Chang Yen-yuan's words. The idea of the self in play is that of the individuating center of the conscious and unconscious minds constructed from the joint legacies of Rousseau and the Enlightenment (the self as a self-interested rational atom) and Freud (the self as driven by unconscious instincts of life and death). This notion of the self is resolutely a child of the western world. The Chinese painter does not express himself but

[25] Siren, pp. 230-231.

rather the spirit that he finds in his subject, a spirit that he, by quieting himself, lets enter and resonate through him.

In the lifelikeness of the art of the Renaissance, the brush strokes of Impressionism, and the spontaneity of Abstract Expression, we have caught but glimpses of the values implicit in Hsieh Ho's principles. The reason we can catch but glimpses is the deep difference between the conceptual schemes with which the Chinese and westerners negotiate their worlds.

Shih-t'ao, An Expressionist Credo *(17th century)*

Shih-t'ao was a member of an imperial family of the Ming dynasty that ended with the invasion of the Manchus in 1644. He became a recluse upon the accession of the Manchus to the throne the Ming had occupied since 1368. The credo he wrote during his years of a monk-like life has been called the "best and deepest essay on art written by a revolutionary artist."[26] Shih-t'ao is called revolutionary for urging artists to create rather than continue merely to copy the style of the ancients. Ming artists had come to put the sixth canon, "copy the ancients," first. Since the opposite of copying is innovating or creating, and since Shih decried the art practice of his time, creating was the theme of this document that is remarkable on two counts. One is that what he calls the one-stroke method is, by his lights, the quintessential art action: it *is* the art of painting. The other is that the idea of heaven and earth is captured in his essay and, by implication, in paintings, by the pairs hills-and-streams, mountains-and-rivers, stone-and-water, bones-and-blood, stillness-and-motion as items on the Saussurian paradigm list tumble into each other. (Saussure's paradigm is a list of words that are substitutable for each other in certain contexts. Hills, mountains, stone, bones, and stillness are close to each other precisely in their respective difference from streams, rivers, water, blood, and motion.)

The One-stroke Method (Section 1 of the Credo*)*

This manifesto demonstrates the sheer materiality of Chinese art, an art whose matter is en-spirited, "born of the spirit and born again," in Hegel's words, but matter nonetheless. Moreover, it gives to art, born

[26] Lin Yutang, p. 137.

as it is of one stroke of the brush, the role that in the west is assigned to language, whose inscriptions and incisions cut up the ribbons of thought into concepts and the ribbons of sound into words. The God of Genesis divided light from darkness by saying 'Let there be light.' Words came first: the world is born of a word, not a one-stroke. Again, the Gospel of John begins 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.' In Greek, 'word' is rendered by 'logos,' which translates as 'reason' as well as 'word.'

Where the Nicene Creed of the Christian begins 'I believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth,' the expressionist creed of Shih-t'ao would begin "I believe in the one-stroke, which is that 'out of which all phenomena are born, [and is] applied by the gods and [is] to be applied by man'."[27] He said that in the primeval chaos there was no difference, and only when difference was introduced was method or law born. It was born of the one-stroke, which "contains in itself the universe and beyond; thousands and myriads of strokes and ink all begin here and end here."[28] Difference and law and language come into being only after the action of the one-stroke. The action of making one-stroke—which is how all brushwork begins—not a word, generates the world, even though it might not have been a brush that made the one-stroke that brought difference and, hence, everything else into being. Shih-t'ao goes on to say that an artist should be able to show the universe in one stroke, which one can do, however, only if one's wrist is fully responsive. To what is the wrist responsive? Not to the appearance of things, the furniture of heaven and earth, but to their nature, their spirit. I quote at length a hymn to the movement of the painter's wrist and to the way it moves the brush to express the vital spirit, the tone and atmosphere, of the water and stone, the rivers and hills, that are the life blood and skeletal structure of the world.

> If the wrist is not fully responsive, then the picture is not good; if the picture is not good it is because the wrist fails to respond. Give it life and luster by circular movement and bends, and by stopping movement give it spaciousness. It shoots out, pulls in; it can be square or round, go straight or twist along, upwards or downwards, to the right and to the left. Thus it lifts and twists in sudden turns, breaks loose or cuts across, like the gravitation of water, or the shooting up of a flame, naturally and without the least straining effect. In this way it penetrates all

[27] Lin Yutang, p. 140.
[28] Lin Yutang, p. 141.

> inner nature of things, gives form to all expressions … With a casual stroke, hills and streams, all life and vegetation and human habitation take their form and gesture, the scene and the feeling connected with it caught hidden or exposed.[29]

The pulsing energy of the prose captures the falling down of water and shooting up of fire, movements of the body of the world. Having read Shih-t'ao, can we say more than that the artist expresses the spirit resonance and life movement of the world's body? Yes. We can infer from his text something about how the artist does it: by quieting and gathering himself so as to be able to "understand the inner law and catch the outward gestures of the delicate complexities of hills and streams and human figures"[30] The understanding informs the painting hand so that hand and controlling wrist know the inner law and outward gestures of things. Mind and hand are one as, then, are the brush strokes, the bone manner, the structure of the hills and streams taking shape under the brush.

Western artists whose metaphysical and epistemological frameworks are far removed from those of the Chinese have described what can happen when they are at their most creative as 'becoming one with what they are making'. The work takes on a life of its own and comes out of the artist as naturally as breath: one could not tell the artist from her art. But there is this difference from what Shih-t'ao describes: the western artist feels the work to be one with herself, the Chinese artist feels herself and her art to be one with the world.

Hills and Streams (Section 8 of the Credo*)*

Our critic said the world with which the Chinese artist feels himself one is captured by the figure of mountains and water that provide, respectively, the structure and lifeblood of the world. Hills and streams do exemplify certain contraries: high and low, still and moving, almost changeless and always changing, solid and liquid. But what comprise the world's structure and lifeblood are not contraries. The functions of mountains and water "lie not in themselves, but in their respective silence and mobility"?[31] Mountains are silent and still, while waters move and make noise: oceans roar, brooks babble, waterfalls thunder,

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[29] Lin Yutang, p. 141.
[30] Lin Yutang, p. 141.
[31] Lin Yutang, p. 156.

waves lap the shore. Silence (and stillness) is the structure of the world and motion (and sound) its lifeblood.

In the language of the first canon, they are the *ch'i-yun* (spirit resonance) *sheng-tung* (life movement) of the universe. *Ch'i-yun sheng-tung* is the rhythmic vitality of everything that is and is, therefore, the vital spirit of the artist as well. When the artist sits in contemplation before taking up his brush, he becomes aware of the spirit of all things resonating in him and is then in the position to meet and comprehend the spirit that inhabits the hills and streams. Why the spirit of these? Because—and again I quote at length, this time the final section of the *Credo* that the translator calls "the strangest discourse" he has ever translated:

> For the immensity of the world is revealed only by the function of water, and water encircles and embraces it through the pressure of mountains. If the mountains and water do not come together and function, there will be nothing to circulate with or about, nothing to embrace. And if there is no circulation and embracing, there will be no means of life and growth.[32]

There is here a materiality that is basic and grand. Our seventeenth century molecules in motion are replaced by water and stone, stone, like the mountains, solid, still, and silent.

The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art (2006)

This is the title of an article by David Clarke that appeared in *Art Journal*, a publication of the College Art Association, in the winter of 2006.[33] His thesis, that "much water-themed contemporary art in China can be best understood as a contestation of state rhetoric concerning the control of water," is credible, the arguments for it ingenious."[34]

Part of the article's significance lies in its reversing the direction of the strategy of the ideologically driven art that dominated the artworld during the rule of Mao. Mao had become a critic, telling artists to paint subjects intended to inculcate the tenets of communism in the minds of the people. Art's message was to be to the people. In an elegant

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[32] Lin Yutang, p. 155.

[33] David Clarke, "The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Art Journal,* Winter 2006, pp. 57-77.

[34] Clarke, p. 68.

reversal, Clarke reads contemporary water-themed art as a message to the ruling body. The art whose subject or medium is water is intended to protest the rhetorical use made by the state of its water projects. These projects range from the fifteen hundred kilometer Red Flag Canal—built in the 1960s by manual laborers who had to drill through a mountain to clear a path for the canal—to the much-vaunted Three Gorges Dam, water rising behind which had displaced nearly a million people by 2005.

Clarke argues that the artists are contesting the discursive dimension of the political sphere, one of whose jobs is to maintain the power and image of legitimacy of the ruling communist party. There is, he notes, an official political discourse on water, and it is this that the current aesthetic discourse in China disputes: not what the government has done, but how it has vested the practical effects of its water projects with symbolic meaning. The projects are used for propaganda purposes: since the party can control even nature, folly it would be to challenge its control over the people. The way the government characterizes human beings as engaged in a battle with nature flies in the face of the traditional Confucian belief in the harmony and oneness of human beings with heaven and earth. Since the communist government portrays itself as being everything to its people, it is with it that the people should seek to be one and not with nature's waters, with which the government is at war. Remember the words of the final section of Shih-t'ao's *Expressionist Credo*, "for the immensity of the world is revealed only by the function of water, and water encircles and embraces it through the pressure of mountains."[35] On the traditional Chinese view, mountains and rivers configure the heavens and earth, and Shih-t'ao here shows how together the two embrace the world.

It is China's waters, not its mountains, that the state seeks to manage with its massive projects, taking water to where none had been and using it to generate electrical power. The communist party has assumed the role of the mountains in exerting the pressure that enables water to perform its functions, at times in ways that the water could not have done without the party-engineered changes. Like stone, the party is solid, not to be moved, not to be changed, silent in giving no reasons for its decisions and answering no questions about them. Stone needs water, as water needs the pressure of stone in the traditional scheme of the order of things in heaven and earth. Clark's contention is that

[35] Lin Yutang, p. 155.

the government's flouting the control over nature demonstrated by the projects to shore up its own power has caused artists to protest the political use to which the canals and dams are put. His thesis is that the number of current water-themed artworks can be explained by interpreting them as protests against the government. The protest is twofold. It is against the government's use of its power over the waters as an emblem of its power over the people, and the inference of its right to govern from the success of the water projects.

To put a different slant on Clarke's contention that China's massive water projects serve a political end, I suggest that the rhetorical use to which the party puts these projects is primarily ontological. It needs the water to maintain the fiction of what it takes itself to be, namely, the social equivalent of the mountains, the complement of the rivers together with which the mountains comprise the world. The fiction is that the communist-controlled Chinese government, like the stone of the mountains and the water of the rivers, is natural and therefore necessary. Rather as the medieval kings evoked the sanction of God, claiming to be his appointees, so the party evokes the sanction of nature, showing itself to have authority even over the waters they can force to bow to its will. It appropriates them as partners in its rhetorical identification of itself with the mountains. An ontological drive underlies and supports the political one that Clarke details. Its logic is this: if the party is seen by the people as the vehicle of the rhythmic vitality, the spirit resonance and life movement of the universe, its power over them is assured.

The country's need for water is, however, not only ontological and political, but also practical and pressing. China abounds in rivers, having more than fifteen hundred, as well as the longest and oldest man-made waterway, the Great Canal. The rivers, then, are crucial to China's flourishing because they irrigate its land for agriculture and unify the whole by connecting its far reaches. However, there are two problems. One has to do with distribution, the other with industrialization. About 44% of the population and 58% of the cultivated land are in the northern and northeastern provinces, while only about 15% of the water resources are..[36] Furthermore, industrial waste is polluting the rivers, and few are the resources in place to purify the water that irrigates crops and supplies drinking water. That China's waters need to be managed is clear, and the government projects, necessary.

[36] These figures are from the website: depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/geo/proper.htm

My claim is that the government uses its successful control of the waterways to foster the idea of its complicity with nature, whose power it then arrogates to itself. What the artists are doing on my view is, then, not so much protesting against the government usurpation of the water discourse as reclaiming it. We may say, fancifully, that the discourse on water symbolically belongs to the artists insofar as the qualities attributable to water are attributable to their art and even to the New China, which is creating itself in a way not unlike the way the artists are creating their art. Like water, art is fluid. Moving and changing, it reflects and refracts light. Such light as falls upon it is not absorbed but given back, now marked by what it touched. Finally, art can murmur or roar but is rarely silent.

The function of waters according to Shih-t'ao is their mobility as they encircle and embrace the world. This means that in capturing and expressing the spirit resonance and life movement of its subject, it is no longer the timeless spirit of the unity of humans, heaven, and earth that is expressed, but the time-sensitive spirit of the history-inflected China. This is the China that opened itself to foreign investment in 1979 in a world whose nations, their cultures and commerce alike, were uniting through the worldwide web. The art of the Chinese avant-garde is mobile, its movement both cause and effect of two sorts of changes, in society and in individuals. One, it reflects and contributes to changes in the society, and, two, it changes its audiences by expressing what they could not otherwise have seen, felt, or heard in the cacophony of the competing discourses of capitalism and communism.

Look now at one water-themed work to see a common strategy emerge that reveals what contemporary artists are expressing through their works and how this differs from what is expressed by both classical Chinese and typical western artists. Clarke characterizes *Fighting the Flood, Red Flag Canal* (1994), a performance by Wang Jin, as an example of an artist "playfully dismantling the rhetoric of state power" of a "Maoist-era symbol of socialist success conceived as triumph over water."[37] The performance began on August 14, 1994, a day when the water supply to part of the city was interrupted. From a bridge over the Red Flag Canal in Henan Province, Wang Jin emptied a fifty-kilogram bag of dry red organic pigment into the canal. The act was playful in literalizing the metaphoric association of red with Chinese

[37] Clarke, p. 70.

communism and was a protest of the pollution of the canal with communist propaganda by polluting it with red pigment. "Too much red is now revealed as a bad thing," Clarke suggests, and since the pigment made the water look as though it were stained by blood, it could, he continues, refer to lives sacrificed to building the bridge or to building the party over the whole of its history.[38]

If the performance is read not as a protest but as an effort by Wang Jin to take back the water from the state, then what Wang did was this: whereas the canal had been red because the government that dug it was communist, now it is red because the artist applied red pigment to it. Now it is literally red, but only for a while. Water, mobile and changing, cannot be painted for more than a short time, but for that short time Wang Jin reduced the red of the communist state to the red of the artist's pigment, suggesting that the communist red is as ephemeral as the artist's. Water finally belongs to no one, no more to the political party of the engineers who re-direct and dam its flow than to the artist who paints it. Wang Jin's red pigment brings the red in *Red Flag Canal* down to earth. Red is nothing but a color, and the water resists it.[39]

Contemporary artists are repeatedly showing what one cannot do to water: paint it, print on it, write with it or under it. In *Writing Diary with Water* (an intermittent and sometimes private diary begun in1995), Song Dong writes on a stone slab with a calligraphy brush using water instead of ink.[40] As soon as the water dries, the written trace disappears, as spoken words do when the sounds fade. Even written words do not last. In a 1997 performance set amidst huge stones through which a stream runs, *Xishanxiaoshu,* LaoZhu wrote a string of poems on a long silk scroll.[41] The scroll was unrolled along the stream, sometimes across rocks in the stream, sometimes submerged in its water. Brush and ink have been likened to stone and water: with the brush, the artist gives shape, bones, to his painting, as stones do to the land; and ink, like water, is liquid. In the row of photographs that document the performance are the hills and streams that comprise the

[38] Clarke, p. 70.

[39] A powerful example: Song Dong in *Printing on Water* (1996) stood in a sacred river in Tibet and repeatedly brought a wooden block carved with the character for "water" down to the water, as though to print "water" on water. The river resisted the coition of word and thing. The word is not the thing.

[40] This work is discussed by Clarke on p. 74 of his article.

[41] This is discussed on p. 58 of Clarke's article.

world in the traditional view. In the hand of LaoZhu are the brush and ink with which he can express the spirit and life movement of the world. The reference to tradition is deepened by the presence of invited friends and musicians playing traditional instruments, both of which allude to meetings of the Chinese literati. This is a reference to the worldviews and practices of the tradition with a difference, however, because when the scroll was submerged in the stream, LaoZhu kept writing on it even though the water washed the inked characters away. The metaphoric identification of ink and water cannot be translated into a real one: water washes ink away.

How do these artworks show their artists trying to take back the discourse of water from the state? Individuals or institutions can make something theirs by mixing either their labor or their language with it. They are trying to mix their language with the water, and the water's resistance to being caught in its network proves water to be primitive, to be able to be appropriated by none. I understand primitive in the Barthesian sense, namely, as that which escapes culture and its languages. The artists are reclaiming the discourse on water for water itself. So far as they succeed in wresting the rights over the discourse from the state, they will also have reclaimed the rivers for the hills, whose identity was being usurped by the political party in power. If the integrity of the rivers is regained, so, it is reasonable to think, will be that of the hills.

The traditional worldview in which water and stone comprise heaven and earth will be back in place for artists and everyone to use as they re-define themselves in a China made new by capitalism and a world made new by globalization. Tradition will have won a place, its music there for the artists and all who would listen to hear and to respond in the myriad ways artists and audiences can respond. In trying to reclaim the water, contemporary artists are not turning to China's past simply to drown out the dissonance of the *prima facie* competing political and economic discourses or to recover a traditional Chinese identity. Rather as the communist party identified itself with the solidity and silence of the mountains, the artists are identifying themselves with what Shih-t'ao identifies as the function of rivers: mobility. They strive to move their audiences to question along with them, who they are, what art is, what it is to be Chinese and to be an artist. The movement is below the level of the discourses of communism and capitalism, below even what Foucault identified as the archeological deep where what can be said and thought is specified. It

is the wellspring of creativity, where one steers by instinct, all rules foregone.

I think that what, finally, is being reclaimed by contemporary Chinese artists is what distinguishes the traditional Chinese view of the world from the western, namely, belief in the oneness of human beings with the universe. Everything in the universe—all nature, all matter, all energy—is believed to be endowed with *Ch'i-yun sheng-tung*, whose expression was the most important of a traditional artist's goals. This conception of spirit has, so far as I know, no counterpart in any view of the world laid out in the west.

Communism and now capitalism, along with the industrial and information revolutions, have cut a broad swath over the timeless landscape of the classical Chinese world, so that it is no longer the One with which intimacy is sought by the contemporary artist. It is with nature, its heartbeat, not its beauty or its scenery, a nature that can nourish and destroy, one that can lay a person low or strike her with awe. And so it is with China, a country whose history is long and written on the land.

In the second comprehensive exhibition in the United Kingdom devoted to contemporary Chinese art are stunning examples of artworks expressive of contemporary artists' sense of their oneness with nature, with the land and its rivers and hills, and of their obedience, witting or not, to the principles of Hsieh Ho.

The Real Thing: Contemporary Art From China (2007)[42]

The Real Thing: Contemporary Art From China is the title of what was misleadingly described as the first such exhibition in the United Kingdom.[43] On view at Tate Liverpool from 30 March to 10 June 2007, none of the work shown had been made prior to 2000, the year of the first exhibition of contemporary international art in China that was organized by a state institution, the Shanghai Museum of Art. A satel-

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[42] I thank Professors Noel Carroll and Beate Schewik for sending me the *TLS* review of this exhibition. Tanya Harrod, "Checked by Hand: The documentary strength of new art form China," *TLS*, June 1, 2007, pp. 18-19. Philip Tanari also reviewed the exhibition in *Artforum*, September 2007, pp. 454-456.

[43] There was an exhibition in London in the autumn of 2006, "China Power Station Part 1," the result of collaboration between the Serpentine Gallery in London and the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo. "China Power Station Part 1I" was shown in the autumn of 2007 in Oslo at the Astrup Fearnley Museum.

lite exhibition entitled *Fuck Off* was curated by Ai Weiwei and, surprisingly, went unchallenged by the authorities.[44]

No curatorial thesis guided the selection of the works in the exhibition, which evolved through extended discussions with a range of artists, critics, and curators. Its curators, critic Karen Smith who has lived in Beijing since 1992 and Shanghai-based artist Xu Zhen, did not want to limit the works shown to what fit an art critical thesis. Rather, they wanted the exhibition to reflect "the variety and strength of contemporary practice."[45] The commercialization of the art market coupled with the interest generated by China's having a *bona fide* artistic avant-garde has tempted artists to make works that are saleable rather than creative. Because of the presence of these factors, the curators said that they took "a creative risk in inviting proposals from those artists we thought most interesting, which provided an opportunity for artists to create a work in relative freedom from market considerations."[46]

The curators were struck by the diversity of views within the art world and by the variety of genres and styles with which many individual artists work. Within this plurality, no practice or style appeared that could be said to represent Chinese art. Moreover, "any idea of a unitary or coherent identity, for the country as much as for the art, has collapsed into an open space of infinite possibility."[47] Even though the curators set out with no presuppositions, certain themes emerged. They described much of the art made since 2000: "more personal and sincere, concerned with reflecting upon one's own place as an individual, rather than seeking to establish a collective position, in a society that is undergoing such rapid changes as to undermine any stable reference point. In short, a search for authenticity, be it private or public."[48] Times of social and economic upheaval often create the felt need for those living through them to search for validity, legitimacy, authenticity. In the search for genuineness great art has been made.

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[44] I discuss works from this exhibition in Mary Bittner Wiseman, "Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65, No. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 109-121 and, in this volume, pp 3 to 21.

[45] Karen Smith and Xu Zhen, *The Real Thing: contemporary art from China*, (Liverpool, England: Tate Liverpool, 2007), p. 10.

[46] *The Real Thing*, p. 12.

[47] *The Real Thing*, p. 11.

[48] *The Real Thing*, p. 13.

Given the previous relative isolation of Chinese artists from the art of the rest of the world and, in particular, from the history of western art during the rule of Mao, the artists do not locate themselves in modern art's master narrative. They are, then, free of it and different in this way from artists of the west. Although Chinese painters were exposed to modernism in the early decades of the 20th century, they were denied exposure from the 1940s when the art was denounced as bourgeois and corrupting. The western art world reintroduced itself to China in the 1980s with Pop Art, which soon became Political Pop, whose works equalized communism and capitalism by reducing their slogans to kitsch. This was a borrowed style, at most a vehicle for speaking up and speaking out, but not the real thing.

Several works from *The Real Thing* help to demonstrate that contemporary Chinese artists are ringing three changes on what the ancients bid them to do. In the words of the ancient critic Chang Yen-yuan, to make a painting of something, the artist must understand it and as we saw above to do this he must "become the thing, *harmonize one's consciousness* with it and reach the mental attitude that brings knowledge without intellectual deliberation."[49] (Emphasis added.) The first change is that contemporary artists use things other than brush and ink to make art. They use their bodies in performance art, various objects in installations, the land itself in earth art.[50] Most of the artworks are intended to be short-lived, living on in photographic and video records of them. Their subjects are the performances, installations, or earthworks themselves, whereas the mountains and streams of Chinese ink paintings are not literally part of the painting. Nor are they representations of the subject of the artwork, but expressions of the resonance of the subject's spirit in the artist.

The second change is that the contemporary artist harmonizes his body, rather than his consciousness, with what he is trying to understand. There is a level below the conscious one at which the body knows. Dancers, gymnasts, athletes all have this subliminal knowledge. The classical artist was often a scholar whose way to knowledge involved his consciousness. The contemporary artist, on the contrary, operates more nearly on the level of the dancer, the gymnast, or the athlete in operating below the level of consciousness. This, then, is the

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[49] Siren, p. 24.

[50] This change is convincingly detailed in Lui Yuedi, "Land Art and the Daoist Appreciation of Nature," *Philosophical Trends,* 331, No. 7 (Beijing: 2005).

third change, from the level on which a scholar operates to that on which a dancer or athlete does.

Toward the end of "The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art," David Clarke notes that Mao had a private political agenda that he furthered with his swimming, An avid swimmer, Mao crossed the strong-flowing Yangtze River in 1956, showing his fitness as a man and, by implication, his fitness as the people's leader. That Mao used his prowess in the water as propaganda is no doubt true, but what is more interesting for my purposes is that whatever his reasons for making a public spectacle of his swimming, while he was swimming, he was in the water. This is no metaphorical oneness with nature but a real one. The same strategy appears again and again in the work of contemporary Chinese artists. The metaphorical is made literal because the figures of language are rejected. Art is made, and life is lived in the new China—whose rules cannot be formulated until its languages are—below the level of language.[51] This is where the instincts are and where matter is. A grand materiality and literalness reigns—red is a pigment, ink is what it is and is not water, and the spirit of the rivers resonates through the person who is in them.

Contemporary Chinese artists have made artworks in which individuals interact with water—Fang Lijun's *1994.2*, a 1994 oil painting of a man floating in a Matisse-blue sea, can be compared with Pierre Bonnard's 1925 *Nude in the Bath Tub* or his 1936 *Nude in the Bath*.[52] However, there are few such works in *The Real Thing,* whereas there are several striking works in which artists interact with mountains. A 2005 performance documented by video stills and photographs entitled *8848 Minus 1.86* consisted of the artist Xu Zhen's taking the measure of Mount Everest. The performance was accompanied by a text that began with a factual account of the Himalayas and ended with the announcement that Xu was going to reduce the size of Everest, the tallest of the Himalayas. The mountain was given its English name in honor of Sir George Everest, the British surveyor-general of India responsible for the Great Trigonometric Survey of India of 1802-1866

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[51] I support this claim in "Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Art (pp. 3-21)."

[52] Water figures prominently in Linda Nochlin, *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2006. See my review in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 65, No. 3 (Summer 2007), pp. 331-333.

that will figure in another work discussed below. The height of the mountain was set at 8848 meters in 1856.[53]

The account of the Himalayas closes with the announcement that on May 22, 2005 a Chinese team would climb to the summit of Everest to measure it again. Not until the end of this otherwise factual account does the artist write that "the Chinese citizen, Xu Zhen, and his team would climb Mount Everest, and cut off its top; reducing its height by 186 cm," which is Xu's height. This is "a task which, to the casual viewer, the team carried out successfully."[54] We are being treated to a simulacrum of the real world, a fictional world, and Xu Zhen wants us to suspend disbelief and look at the video stills and documentary photographs and the refrigerated summit of Everest as though he really had imposed himself on the mountain. Was Xu Zhen one with the mountain in his performance? Yes, deliberately to climb a mountain is to put oneself into intimate relation with it. In the simulacrum Xu Zhen did more than this, however. He left his mark on it by reducing its height by his own and, with that act, entered the history of the measurement of the height of the mountain. This hypothetical performance can be read either as an act of arrogant self-assertion in the face of a powerful nature or as a comment on how the exact measurement of the mountain does not touch its splendor or its sublimity. It is vast, and wonderful for that, regardless of whether it is more or less 1.86 of its meters.

Was the artist in harmony with the mountain on May 22, 2005? Yes, and they were equal partners in the encounter: it did not overwhelm him and he did not diminish it. In being Everest's equal, Xu showed himself to have captured its spirit and therefore to have satisfied Hsieth Ho's first principle. He paid homage to the mountain by removing its peak and putting it on display, knowing that this made no difference to the mountain. Move now from the top of a mountain to the bowels of the earth and its coalmines. Reports from official Xinhua News Agency refer to coal mining as the "deadliest job in China" and to the mines as "killer mines."[55] "As China Roars, Pollution Reaches Deadly Extremes" read the four-column-wide headline on the front page of *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 26, 2007. "Just as

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[53] Xu Zhen takes this measurement to be authoritative, even though an American team put a Global Positioning System on the highest bedrock in 1999 and found the mountain to be 8850 meters.

[54] *The Real Thing*, p. 137.

[55] *The Real Thing*, pp. 162-163.

the speed and scale of China's rise as an economic power has no clear parallel in history, so its pollution problem has shattered all precedents." The article continues, "The growth derives … from a staggering expansion of heavy industry and urbanization that requires colossal inputs of energy, almost all from coal, the most readily available, and dirtiest, source." And, we might add, the most dangerous. China accounts for 80% of the world's deaths from mining accidents while producing 35% of the world's coal.

Artists use water and mountains as media as well as subject matter of art, but I know of none who have used the insides of mountains as medium for art. In 2006, Yang Shoabin made a series of numbered oil paintings, at least eighteen, called *800 Metres,* titles which, like Xu Zhen's, cite numbers of meters with no hint as to what the meters measure. Born in 1963, Yang Shoabin tells of growing up with Social Revolutionary Realism paintings full of sunshine, blue skies, and workers portrayed as knights of the state. But, he said, that time has passed and when he returned to the coalmines in the town where he grew up, things were dire. He could "only marvel at the vitality of these workers, and the life force demonstrated by their children" whose life is about nothing beyond survival.[56] He asked himself how we are to view their situation today against the revolutionary socialism of China's recent history, and the force of the question led him to paint *800 Metres*. Here the contemporary move is not from the metaphorical oneness with nature of the classical painters and thinkers to a real oneness. It is rather from the socialist state's identification of itself as that with which individuals should harmonize themselves to a non-ideological identification of the artist with the life of the coal miners. By implication, the artist identifies himself also with the mountain whose depths the miners engage as they work to wrest from it the coal necessary to sustain their country's economic boom.

Of the five paintings from the *800 Metres* series in the catalogue of *The Real Thing*, three, each approximately 2.5 by 3.3 feet, are close ups of miners' blackened faces. In one, there is one miner, in another, two, and in another, three. The man alone is set in the mine's changing room, the pair are in a cityscape, and the three are at the entrance to a mine where an elevator is taking men down and burrowing instruments stand idle. The other two of the five are large, almost 7 feet by more than 11. The workers in them are working, whereas in the other

[56] *The Real Thing*, p. 167.

three they are looking out at the viewer. In one of the large paintings, four men are drilling into a rock that occupies more than half of the picture plane—the rock is as important as the men—and in the other, two men and three women, naked from the waist up, are in a coal bin sorting through pieces of coal. Two of the women are bent, as their ancestors had been in rice paddies for centuries, with their backs to the viewer. The third woman turns three-quarters of the way to confront the viewer, her breast revealed. Of the two male miners, one is bent as the women are and the other turns three-quarters toward the viewer, but does not confront the viewer.

Were the viewer able to see the whole series, she would, were she responsive to the paintings, find the spirit of the miners resonate in her and would, assuming that spirit resonance is transitive, find the spirit of the mountain's depths to resonate as well. The artist expressed the hope that *800 Metres* "will be read as a real critique of history and contemporary reality."[57] Yang Shoabin did not open himself to the timeless harmony of the realm comprised of heaven and earth, hills and streams, stone and water, to which the scholar-painter-poet opened himself in classical times, but to the material reality of a society whose greatest achievement, rapid industrialization, is also its biggest burden.[58] The real critique of contemporary reality that Yang Shoabin takes on in *800 Metres* is effective only if the viewer of the work can open herself to the *ch'i-yun* (spirit resonance) and *sheng-tung* (life movement) of the earth's mountains through empathy with its miners.

There is a final work to be brought into this discussion about contemporary Chinese artists' intimacy with the earth and about how their intimacy, not innocent of history, differs from that of earlier Chinese artists. This is a discussion mindful of the absence of any version of the desire to harmonize with the universe on the part of artists in the west. The work is *Railway from Llasa to Katmandu* … a multimedia installation and performance work made by Qiu Zhijie in 2006-7. The artist teaches at the China National Academy in Hangzhou. In June 2006 he took his students on a field trip to the western part of Sichuan where it borders on Tibet and is home to many Tibetan nationals. The initial purpose was to look for the origins of the myths

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[57] *The Real Thing*, p. 167.

[58] In September 2007, *The New York Times* began a three-part article on the problem of pollution in China.

of Shangri-La and to discover why it had become popular in the west after World War 1 "with the perceived bankruptcy of capitalistic ideals."[59] The idea of Shangri-La was born as the result of the first journey made across Tibet by an outsider, Nain Singh, a thirty-three year old Indian man who, in 1863, began two years of training under Captain T. G. Montgomerie of the Royal British Engineers in India. He was to gather enough data to map the territory from the Indian side of the Himalayas to Lhasa, Tibet's capital. Singh learned to walk in thirty-three inch leg irons so that he could measure precisely the distance he traveled and to measure his orientation and altitude "using a mercury-filled tea cup and a thermometer inserted into his walking stick."[60] This project was part of the Great Trigonometric Survey in India mentioned above.

Qui Zhijie believed that the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad on July 1, 2006 would change the Tibetan traditional way of life as nothing else had, not even the imposition of Chinese rule in 1959. In honor of that first trip to Tibet in 1865, and on the eve of the intrusion of the modern world with the railroad, Qui Zhijie decided to walk from Lhasa to Katmandu (opposite the direction in which Nain walked), which was the next leg planned for the railroad. He anticipated the forward march of the railroad by making a facsimile of a rail for the track for this future leg. To this end he collected pieces of metal from people along his route, had them melted down and forged into a rail that he suspended in space—a sign of this being the world's highest railroad.

Moreover, to bring money to the artists in the region, he had them paint *tankas*—works that tell stories of holy men and disseminate spiritual values—describing Nain's journey. Qui Zhijie tried to follow Nain Singh's ways of measuring and wore his thirty-three inch leg irons as Singh had done. After walking about 370 of the 500 miles of the trip, bad weather forced him to stop in 2006. He completed the journey early in 2007, suffering not from the harsh weather, however, but from the leg irons eating away at his ankles.

There are myriad messages in *Railway from Llasa to Katmandu* … I mention but a few. One, the artist is playing with the idea of time in walking where a past journey was made and a future railway will be. He duplicated a journey made in the past but in the opposite direction,

[59] *The Real Thing*, p. 98.
[60] *The Real Thing*, p. 98.

which puts him in the direction of the continuation of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in the future. Two, by literally walking the walk instead of only talking the talk of the history of the myth of Shangri-La, Qui Zhijie introduced a note of reality. Furthermore, he took the measure of Tibet with his body, using the length of his strides rather than a measuring instrument, paying the price with the chaffing of his ankles. Qui is actually doing something similar to what Xu Zhen did (not really do) when he climbed Everest to take the measure of the mountain, reducing it by his height. Perhaps not incidentally, Tibet and Mount Everest have long captured the imagination of westerners, as, respectively, figures of mystery and sublimity. The two artists de-mystify them.

Three, where Yang Shoabin in his *800 Metres* takes issue with social revolutionary realism's idealization of labor by pitting the realism of *800 Metres* against it, Qui Zhijie in *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu … takes issue instead with the imperialist motives behind the 19th century British engineers' desire to map the land hitherto unexplored by outsiders. What the British found in Tibet gave rise to western fantasies that the new railway will destroy. His performance, then, followed the route of the long walk that gave rise to the myth of Shangri-La and is the same route of the rail line that will destroy it. The railway will destroy it both by letting its passengers see how much has already changed—they will see monks riding motorbikes and using cell phones—and by threatening to sound the death knell for the way of life that had excited the imagination of so many in the west. The story that began with Nain Singh's journey will end with the completion of the final stretch of the Quinghai-Tibet railway from llasa to Katmandu, the stretch that Qui Zhijie walked in the *Railway from Llasa to Katmandu …* A quotation from Qui Zhijie captures a spirit running through the work in the *The Real Thing*: *Contemporary Art From China* and shows expression to have stayed at the fore in the new art in China. "Artists are only as good as the language they use to express themselves; to express their real feelings. Real personal feeling must reflect an historical sensibility, a social experience."[61]

I close with a bow to both Rudolph Arnheim and Hsieth Ho made in the form of variations of certain of their ideas that appear in recent work of Zhang Huan seen in 2007 at the Asia Society and Museum in

[61] *The Real Thing*, p. 98.

New York and in 2010 at Pace Beijing.[62] Arnheim's idea that dynamic properties are expressive and inhere in the art object itself gets revised in works whose material is as significant and expressive as are the dynamic properties of the forms the material takes.

Altered States: Art of Zhang Yuan (2007)

Zhang Huan visited Tibet for the first time in 2005 and saw many pieces of statues of the Buddha broken during the Cultural Revolution. He collected them and used them to make large sculptures of parts of the Buddha. There were two in the Asia Society—one, a large forearm and hand, the other, a leg and foot, with a small head coming out of the foot. The sculptures, fragments made of fragments, are monumental. In their monumentality they can be read as refusals of the western tendency to parse the world in terms of kinds and assign little value to mere parts of either a type (any Buddha statue) or a token (this Buddha statue) of the kind. Of primary importance in the works is the history of their material, not the dynamic properties or directed tensions of its form. By incorporating the past, the work recovers it. Debris no longer, the broken Buddha pieces have become a celebration in which what were indifferent parts now make a whole—albeit a whole western metaphysics would deem but a part. Zhang Huan made art also from ashes left by offerings and incense in Buddhist temples. He contracted with the largest temple in Shanghai to let his crew cart these ashes away. On view in the Asia Society exhibition was a large Buddha head, reaching almost to the ceiling, made from the ashes of offerings and prayers to Buddha. In the exhibition are also paintings of a map of the United States and of China made from temple ashes. In these three works the dead past—ashes are dead—is brought back to life.

Here, as in the statues of Buddha parts, history inheres in the work's material rather as the work's dynamic qualities inhere in its form. Here it is the history of the material rather than the dynamic tensions in the form that give the work its meaning. The materials are given form in "a series of factory workshops on the outskirts of this city [Shanghai, where] welders, carpenters, and other skilled craftsman are busy turning wood, metal and other items into fine objects. … This

[62] *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, Asia Society and Museum in Manhattan. September 6, 2007–January 20, 2008. This is the museum's first retrospective of a living artist.

former Japanese textile mill, now with 100 workers in its 75,000 square feet of space, is the studio of Zhang Huan, one of China's most daring artists."[63] Gone is the motion of the individual artist's wrist all-important to the classical Chinese painter, in its place the communal activity of craftsman bringing to light Zhang Huan's ideas.

A harmony with a pre-Mao past is sought through matter, not the corpse-like, mindless stuff of Cartesian metaphysics, but matter charged with energy and resonant with the history of its past, here, the Buddhism formerly put in shadow by the People's Republic of China. The materialism is a legacy of Marx, the material respected not as it was by Marx for its use in the production of goods necessary for human life, but for its past. The respect for history is a legacy of Hegel. What do these materials express in the form that Zhang Huan instructs his workers to given them? They express a deep respect for the past and a refusal to let the present exclude it. The spirit, the significance, the *fact* of the existence of the fragments of broken statues and the ashes of prayers and hopes resonate in the particular material of Zhang's sculptures that, like T. S. Eliot's Chinese jar, move perpetually in their stillness. The artist's goal to achieve in his work the resonance of spirit and movement of life is satisfied by Zhang's celebration of the materiality of the world. His respect for the matter of the world comports with his classical forebears finding earth and heaven and all there is, in a pair that is liquid and solid, transparent and opaque, formless and formed, singing and still, that is to say, in water and stone.

In *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains*, the 2010 exhibition at Pace Beijing, whose title refers to a series of paintings made from incense ash, Zhang Huan celebrates the energy of the world. The tiger is the earth symbol in China, an equal rival of the dragon, the spirit symbol. Together they are yin and yang, matter and spirit. He is considered the king of the animals because the Chinese character for 'king,' three horizontal strokes cutting through one vertical, resembles the stripes on the tiger's forehead. Whereas in Imperial China, the tiger personified war, in 1959 Mao declared it, together with leopards and wolves, a pest and an enemy of the people. (The Chinese government reversed itself in 1977 and banned hunting the erstwhile pests.) The South China tiger, the evolutionary antecedent of the original eight species of which three have become extinct, is the one closest to extinction.

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[63] *The New York Times*, nytimes.com, September 3, 2007.

There were over 100,000 tigers in the wild in 1900, and now there are between 5000 and 7000. Only 80 are South China tigers.

Symbol of power, force, and strength, the tiger, like the lion in the west, is master of the forest and protector of the mountains, to which in Zhang's paintings he returns. Zhang Huan perhaps better than any other contemporary Chinese artist exemplifies what is distinctive of the best art being made by Chinese artists a decade into the twenty-first century. His work exemplifies the first canon laid out by Hsieh Ho and lovingly observes the materiality and life movement of the world. I end with the words of the curator of the exhibition, Leng Lin:

> 2010 is a very special year. We have just held a global conference on climate change and we are about to suffer abnormal climate shifts … In our corner of the world, the rapid rise of urbanization and globalization as well as the wide reaching effects and nature of the economic crisis has brought doubt to our hopes for the future. Harmony, balance, and nature are bound to replace our unsure visions of the future. Creative forces are being transformed into natural forces. Zhang Huan's *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains* exhibition is a return to and release of natural force—a demand for natural simplicity.[64]

[64] *Free Tiger Returns to the Mountains*, Pace Beijing. May 20–July 20, 2010.

NATURAL BEAUTY AND LITERATI STROKES: SHI TAO, MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE PRACTICE OF PAINTING

David A. Brubaker

How does a painter develop an aesthetic awareness of environment, observe the fusion of self with bamboo, and create natural beauty with ink and paper? This three-part question challenges current philosophies of aesthetic experience, embodiment, and the beautiful in nature and art. In the modern period, aesthetic experience has at times been associated with delight in the free-play of cognitive faculties and not in natural objects, so the idea that aesthetic appreciation stems from contact with a place or location in which self is inseparable from natural environment is both puzzling and novel. How self and nature could ever fuse or intersect is a difficult question when many philosophers regard the idea of self as an illusion or mere construct and define 'nature' and 'body' exclusively in terms belonging to the natural sciences. If we hold that the beauty of nature pleases because of its existence but that the beauty of art does not, then how can anyone claim that an artistically created brush stroke is naturally beautiful? Yet, many aestheticians are bringing us closer to new answers for this initial question. Arnold Berleant writes that the human observer has an aesthetic awareness of continuity with environment. Elaine Scarry claims that we undergo a radical decentering at the roots of our sense experience when we are in the presence of beautiful things such as palm trees and Matisse's paintings of them: we undergo a transformation through our bodies, land in a different relation to the world, and "willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us."[1]

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[1] See Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); and Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 41, 111. Scarry considers and quotes Simone Weil's somatic account of the decentering and transformation that we undergo at the roots of our own sensibility and sense impressions when we see something beautiful. For another philosopher who seeks to situate beautiful experiences within one's own body, see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lantham, Maryland: Roman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 277-278.

To advance even more rapidly in answering my three-part question, artists and aestheticians may explore what Chinese literati painters have said concerning their immediate acquaintance with nature, self in continuity with environment, and the making of naturally beautiful brush strokes. Su Shih (1031–1101) and Shi Tao (1642–1707) give us hints about the self-transformation and communion with environment that is needed for making lively paintings of natural beauty with brush strokes. With this essay, I analyze five features of the practice of literati painting with the help of Gao Jianping and Peng Feng. By adding Merleau-Ponty's late writings on the self-embodiment of the working painter, I argue that all five features can be interpreted in a way that contemporary readers of this text will regard as authoritative for themselves.

Section One: The Making of Literati Strokes: Five Features

There are at least five features that literati painters associate with the making of brush strokes that merit the label naturally beautiful. They are: (1) the interaction of ideas with body, (2) concentration on paper, (3) suspension of visual perceptions of natural objects and qualities, (4) transformation into a pure self, and (5) awareness of a place where self and nature intersect. These features are traditionally used to differentiate literati painters from both academic painters at court and professional artisans. I outline the five features, note supporting sources in Chinese aesthetics, and consider some puzzles.

Gao Jianping emphasizes that the process of literati painting is a sequential movement from yi (idea or intent), qi (strength, vital force), shi (momentum), to bi (use of the brush). During the making of brush strokes in the literati manner, there are also readjustments that require the continual interaction of yi, qi, shi, and bi; for example, a new stroke in ink may lead the painter to modify the initial idea or intent. My present remarks address mainly the interaction between yi and bi. After observing a mountain or a katydid, the literati painter develops yi , an idea, that is stored as a seed to be revived during the act of painting. As Shi Tao states, the painter develops yi at least in part by experiencing natural objects: "The heights of mountains and the depths of the sea are the primary models used to paint hills or valleys."[2] Yet Gao

[2] See E. J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting By Shih-T'ao, A Translation and Exposition of his Hua-P'u* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), p. 122.

notes that yi is generated by the heart as well. Profound concentration that stems from living among mountain and katydids places images of these objects in the heart of the painter. Later, the painter retrieves yi to guide body and hand in the making of strokes. The painter's idea or yi is a 'mental state plus strategy' that is used with the medium of paper and ink to achieve a particular effect. There is a circular and on-going interaction of mind, hand and paper.[3]

Given this background, it is easy to affirm the first feature of literati painting: the interaction between idea and body. The painter's hand, brush, ink and paper are physical objects involved in motions that require management. This is implied by Shi Tao's advice that when using a heavy brush, we "must quickly lift up from the paper in order to avoid a heavy atmosphere."[4] Gao correctly suggests that the bodily practice of literati painting is an act of physical movement.

The painter's concentration on the paper that is to display strokes in ink is the second feature. The painter's concentration on or contemplation (guanxiang) of paper is essential and must never be forgotten. Gao is insistent: "the practice of making a painting resides precisely in the interaction between mind, the hand, and the paper."[5] Gao goes on to argue persuasively that concentration on paper is implied in the following remarks by Shi Tao on making brush strokes: "That which is one-stroke is the rudimentary commencement of applying brush and ink. Transformed strokes are the rudimentary ways of applying brush and ink."[6] It is on the paper that the strokes are made. Wang Yanqi (1642-1715) also points to this feature: the painter "must be silent in the face of the white silk [on which the stroke will fall] and concentrate."[7]

The third feature belonging to the practice of literati painting or the making of literati brush strokes is this: the painter does at times suspend visual experience of particular natural objects and appearances. During walks in nature and later in painting, perceptions of objects become obstacles that block the literati painter from observing nature in a more intimate way. Peng confirms this idea of suspension: the painter must give up the restlessness in spirit that arises from taking

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[3] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Painting*, pp. 44, 153-154, 173-174, 192.

[4] E. J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting By Shih-T'ao*, p. 132.

[5] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Painting*, p. 156.

[6] E. J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting By Shih-T'ao*, p. 122.

[7] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Painting*, p. 156.

the scientific attitude or the standpoint of knowledge toward nature: "Only when an artist loses his intention, perhaps even his creative ability, will he be able to create outstanding works of art."[8] The more the painter works from perceptions and the intention of making strokes that resemble natural objects, the greater the separation of the painter from nature and the more lifeless the artwork. Shi Tao's remarks tend to confirm this feature as well: he warns that the painter must not be trapped by experience and knowledge. He regrets that some painters cannot be free, since their 'knowledge' restrains them. If the painter aims to make strokes that resemble those of earlier artists or the styles of the ancients, then the painter "merely eats their leftovers."[9] The painter should not aim merely to make what resembles either a natural object or the style of an earlier artist.

This brings us to the fourth feature that differentiates the working literati painter: the emergence of a pure self. The claim here is that an extraordinary sense of self emerges both during pre-production walks and while painting. During walks, the painter contemplates objects of daily life, e.g. bamboo, so intensively that the self of ordinary cognition or the I is forgotten. Gao finds that the writings of Su Shih and Wang Xizhi (303–361, called the Great Calligrapher) confirm that such a pure self emerges when the painter begins to develop yi. Gao reminds us that this forgetting does not do away with the self completely; forgetting is "rather a means to transform the self which exists in daily life into the pure self of a painter."[10] In the studio the painter undergoes a similar transformation from the I of cognitive experience to a self that is pure or at least unencumbered by perceptual experience of natural objects. Peng affirms this feature in a fruitful way: individual artists are guided to their "original sensitive nature" and obtain the creating state, "the pure state of existence."[11] The idea of some such element of pure existence is perhaps also suggested in Shi Tao's claim that his own reality is present when he freely creates particular forms: "The reason that I am myself is that there is a real self present;" indeed, even if the stroke is undesirable and the ink is weak, "my own reality is in the painting."[12] While interpreting Shi Tao's remarks, Peng

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[8] Peng Feng, "Natural Beauty and a Review of Chuang Tzu's Aesthetics," *Journal of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Tokyo, Aesthetics*, Vol. 25 (2000), p. 106.

[9] E. J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting By Shih-T'ao*, p. 118.

[10] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Painting*, pp. 158, 188-189.

[11] Peng Feng, "Natural Beauty and a Review of Chuang Tzu's Aesthetics," p. 107.

[12] E. J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting By Shih-T'ao*, p. 118.

describes the sense in which self is still present when perception is in abeyance: there should be "no gap between brush and ink, hands and mind, mind and eyes, eyes and the thing that one is painting."[13] To put this in another way, suspension of perception brings the mind closer to the two eyes, which present the artist with sensitive existence in nature. As a painter who moves ink on visible paper, Shi Tao is aware of himself as free from the styles of the ancients; he does not wait to be freed by ideas from the ancients or by yi that is stored as a seed.

The fifth feature is the painter's observation of an intersection of self and nature. As Gao puts it, the act of literati painting is "being true to the unique communication of the painter with nature precisely at the moment of painting:" the painter's self belongs to nature, and nature becomes an essential element of the painter's self.[14] Zeng Yunchao implies awareness of such an intersection or wholeness when he replies to the question of whether the painting of insects can be taught: "When I put brush to paper, I forget whether I become the katydid or whether the katydid becomes me."[15] Shi Tao, who claims to communicate on behalf of mountains, implies a similar inseparability: "They are in me and I am in them."[16]

These five features are often discussed in connection with a poem by Su Shih, poet, calligrapher, and art critic of the Northern Song. In the poem below, Su describes literati painting as practiced by his friend and cousin, Wen Tong (1019-1079). Wen never allowed anyone to see him painting. Yet Su is familiar with painting and his cousin's approach: "Wen Tong taught me in this way; I could not achieve it, but understood the way it should be done."[17] Thus, the poem is a valuable description of what the literati painter goes through in actually making a brush stroke.

> When Yu-ke painted bamboo,
> He saw bamboo, not himself,
> Nor was he simply unconscious of himself:
> Trance-like, he left his body.
> His body was transformed into bamboo.

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[13] Peng Feng, "Aesthetic Experience as Present Experience: One Dimension of Chinese Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics and Culture, East and West,* eds. Gao Jianping and Wang Keping (2006), p. 622.

[14] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Painting*, p. 157.

[15] *Ibid.*, 139.

[16] E. J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting By Shih-T'ao*, pp. 75, 126.

[17] Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 207.

> Creating inexhaustible freshness.
> Chuang Chou [Zhuangzi] is no longer in this world,
> So who can understand such concentration?[18]

Although Wen Tong leaves his body, his body migrates in some manner and becomes bamboo. There is no suggestion that Wen is ever disembodied; on the contrary, Susan Bush describes this as the "fusion of self and object."[19] The clear reference in the poem to Wen's embodiment and transformation in relation with bamboo raises a key question of interpretation: Is the poem describing Wen's behavior as it might have been perceived at a distance by Su Shih? Or does it convey instead Wen's own trance-like observation of his bodily transformation into bamboo? One plausible reply is 'both'. At least in part, Su suggests to his readers (who are themselves skilled in calligraphy or painting) that Wen is observing his own practice. This reading fits well with Shi Tao's description of his relation with mountains and rivers: They are in me and I am in them. There is another question of interest: How does Wen observe his transformation into bamboo, given that he paints back in the studio? Does he merely imagine bamboo? Perhaps he observes himself transforming into the bamboo that emerges, stroke by stroke, within visible paper.

According to Susan Bush, Su Shih's poem is echoed much later in a poem by the literati painter Wu Chen (1280–1354). Wu describes what he observes of himself when he makes brush strokes. He acts physically to move the brush. But he reports that he is unaware of hand and brush:

> When I begin to paint I am not conscious of myself
> And I am completely unaware of the brush in my hand.
> If the butcher or the wheelwright were to return,
> Wouldn't they recognize this feeling again?[20]

Clearly, Wu Chen looks while painting, but he does not concentrate on perceiving the motion of his hand and brush. Taken together, the poems here by Su Shih and Wu Chen suggest the following: the painter

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[18] Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting, Su Shih (1037) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 41.

[19] Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting, Su Shih (1037) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)*, p. 41. Gao's translation of the poem includes the following phrases: "he forgot his own body … The body was transformed in concert with bamboo … Zhuangzi is no longer living … who can understand such spiritual concentration?" see Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Painting*, p. 82.

[20] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art*, p. 132.

suspends conscious perception of some particulars of physical embodiment and yet observes self fused with environment. Since Shih refers to Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE) and Wu Chen uses the phrase 'the butcher or the wheelwright', which refers indirectly to the story of Ding, the cook, in the text Zhuangzi, it is clear that both invite us to compare their comments on the process of painting with Daoist interpretations of the self's own immediate connection with nature.[21] We may take these references to Daoism as strong evidence for the conclusion that Su Shih and Wu Chen are also committed to the fifth feature, the fusion or intersection of self with nature. This reading of the poems is supported by Peng Feng's interpretation of Zhuangzi: "Chinese philosophers want people to feel their deep harmony with nature as they uncover their original sensitive communication with nature."[22]

It is time to pause for consideration of some puzzles. How is the painter aware of the bodily process of making strokes, when experiences of hand and brush are suspended? Is this thought of a pure awareness a return to the innocent perceiving eye? Moreover, the painter is said both to suspend ordinary perception and to notice a fusion of self with nature. What then of George Dickie's claim that the idea of a disinterested or extra-ordinary attention (i.e., the suspension of visual perceptions while looking at natural objects) and the idea of a fusion of human observer with natural objects or qualities are both instances of a mythical aesthetic attitude that is no longer useful?[23] Finally, even if we suppose that Wen Tong observes such a fusion of himself with nature, why should the philosopher of art regard this most personal observation as authoritative for others?

We arrive at a genuine option that marks our historical moment. Either we accept the five features as live explanatory hypotheses and as something we can apply to our art practice or we go without them. Either we treat the choice between the five features of literati painting and at least some doctrines of modern philosophy (e.g. the myth of the aesthetic attitude, the primacy of perception) as a genuine option between live hypotheses or we do not. If we simply continue to privi-

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[21] For the story of Ding, who moves knife by spirit and not his eyes (though he is careful to keep his eyes steady), see *Zhuangzi*, trans. Hyun Hochsmann and Yang Guorong (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), pp. 99-100.

[22] Peng Feng, "Natural Beauty and a Review of Chuang Tzu's Aesthetics," p. 106.

[23] See George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," in *Art and Philosophy, Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. W. E. Kennick (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), pp. 443-444.

lege received doctrines of modern philosophy and deny that there is a genuine option here, then the writings of Su Shih, Shi Tao, and traditional Chinese aesthetics will probably be dismissed as meaningless, not sufficiently objective, of trivial interest, and not necessarily authoritative for others today. In short, one of our options is the conventional path that merely conserves already entrenched modern ideas concerning nature and self. 'Body' would still refer to extended things, natural objects or processes within the subject-matter of the natural sciences, as it has for Descartes, G. E. Moore and many philosophers today. This choice also conserves the long-standing attitude toward self, which stretches from David Hume to William James and now to others who go so far as to claim that 'self' refers to a convenient fiction: whenever I try to intimately observe the existence of myself, I can observe only some perception and "never can observe any thing but the perception."[24] There is no bedding to unify or sustain the succession of experiences that are cognitive to each other. However, if instead we accept that a genuine option exists today because the five features of the practice of literati painting are live hypotheses, then we must agree to re-inspect our own senses for evidence that may enable us to uphold all five features. The search for evidence capable of sustaining the five features of the practice of literati painting is opened; as a result, we would seek out and consider new ways to describe our standards for accepting something as evidence, the relation of self to environment, and the aesthetics of the environment. If we accept the features under discussion as live hypotheses, then each of us agrees to test the following hypothesis: the eyes of a person (e.g. any landscape painter working en plein air or in the studio) can provide evidence of self in fusion with environment, even without first providing perceptions of the natural environment. What a thought! What could count as evidence of my own inseparability from natural life if not my own perceptions?

The dilemmas that arise from accepting one or more of the five features as live hypotheses are already apparent in current literature on the aesthetics of environment. For example, Arnold Berleant seems to confirm one feature, namely, that each of us can acquire an awareness of a place where self and nature intersect; however, he seems to resist the claim that such a fusion depends on suspending perceptions

[24] David Hume, "Book I," *Treatise on Human Nature* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 300. See Book I, Sect. VI, *Of Personal Identity*.

of natural objects and on a transformation into a pure self. His remarks suggest an acceptance of fusion since he claims that there are moments of aesthetic appreciation in which the wholeness of an environmental situation "can no more be separated from my presence than my experience can [be separated] from it [the environmental situation];" he adds that "the human participant is so absorbed into a situation as to become inseparable from and continuous with it."[25] He describes the non-objective character of this inseparability:

> Environment is no region separate from us. It is not only the very condition of our being but a continuous part of that being … It is for this reason that environmental appreciation cannot be directed toward an object, for there is none … If environment is no object, it must nonetheless be locatable for us to experience it and identifiable to discuss it. Is it possible to specify an environment under such conditions?[26]

Su Shih's poetic question, 'So who can understand such concentration?' returns to rouse modern philosophers from a materialist slumber: Who can describe the human participant's inseparability from environment, while naming no object? However, despite the suggestion here of absorption and fusion, Berleant never accepts the suspension of perception of natural objects, since he claims that absorption never occurs without perception: "The human environment is, in the final account, a perceptual system and, as such, an order of experience."[27] As a result, Berleant's language implies a commitment to two live hypotheses that are difficult to reconcile: inseparability of self from a nature that is no object and separateness of the human perceiver from nature that is located as many objects. His account seems at odds with itself or incomplete: he observes himself as continuous with an environment that is not an object, but he is continuous with it by means of keen perceptions of particular natural objects or processes (birds, flowers, wind). In effect, Berleant's fruitful aesthetics of environment produces a genuine option, a momentous choice between the hypothesis that he observes himself as inseparable from nature and the hypothesis that he always observes nature by perceiving it as some object of experience.

There is reason for Berleant to reject worn Cartesian and Kantian ideas of self as something separate from 'a place in the open light of

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[25] Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment,* pp. 34-35.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

action'. But by upholding the idea that continuity occurs through perception, his articulation of absorption and unity is left incomplete. To repair this, he could open the search for some element of the self that is observable in the open light of action and yet not reducible to perceptions of natural objects. But this move would require him to accept the novel hypothesis that each of us is able to observe self in unity with nature even when perceptions are suspended. Berleant is correct to insist, as a first step, that our appreciation of environment as aesthetically good cannot be explained merely by reference to our understanding of the science of geology or topography. Alan Carlson does advocate such an objective path: he claims that aesthetic appreciation of environment occurs through perceptions given and informed by the categories of natural science. But as Peng Feng points out, Carlson's account runs into trouble and does not work well when it comes to explaining our appreciation of aesthetically good artworks. Indeed, the writings of Chinese literati painters pose an interesting challenge for Carlson's account of aesthetic appreciation; for they hint that the way in which a painter creates and appreciates the beauty and aesthetic goodness of nature is similar to the way in which the painter creates and appreciates the aesthetic goodness and natural beauty of brush strokes that emerge within visible paper.

With this investigation, I choose to regard all five features of the literati process of painting as live hypotheses. I ask this question: What interpretation can we find for the self's own body (e.g. for my embodiment), so that we can begin to explain how Wen Tong observes his own body fusing with bamboo? Where do we start? We can start with Gao Jianping's reminder: the practice of making a brush stroke must not be considered apart from concentration on paper. It is the second feature, concentration on paper, which will give us clues leading to an interpretation that unifies all five features.

Section Two: Contemplation of Paper: Calligraphy, Go, and One-Stroke

Literati painters do describe the way in which they concentrate on paper. Their remarks lead us to consider three topics: the practice of calligraphy, the placing of stones in the game of go, and the one-stroke method of painting. With these avenues of investigation as a guide, we

can begin to articulate what the literati painter notices in concentrating on paper during the making of strokes.

First, literati painters compare the practice of making brush strokes with the writing of Chinese characters. They sometimes defend their novel process by claiming that calligraphy and painting share the same origin (shuhua-tongyuan). Gao Jianping argues that the relevant point is that characters need not resemble what they denote; "they are symbols for signifying meanings rather than images for representing the appearances of objects."[28] Thus, literati painting can be considered as a kind of picture writing in which brush strokes transplant the sense of beauty traditionally associated with Chinese calligraphy; in both practices beauty depends on the simplicity, clarity, and fluidity of strokes, not on resemblance to natural objects. But more can be said: the calligrapher must also concentrate on the ground of paper or silk that precedes and supports each stroke. Chiang Yee (1903–1977) makes this point in his text on writing characters. It is attentiveness to the space and not the strokes that gives liveliness to a character: "Space gives breadth and 'light' to a character. The strokes can be well formed and lively and yet the characters appear blank and dead because cramped or disproportionately spaced."[29] The so-called 'empty' portions of paper must not be considered as complete voids; these spaces join stroke-to-stroke, exhibit an inherent harmony with the strokes, and are inspired by the beautiful and irregular spacing between stars in the night sky. Continuing, Chiang claims that this attentiveness to empty space is relevant to Chinese painting: "The part played by blank spaces in Chinese painting is noticed by everyone."[30] Therefore, we may take literati painters to be suggesting that the making of a naturally beautiful stroke requires concentration on the surrounding empty space that sustains strokes. The calligrapher or painter who simply duplicates the form of some paradigmatic model will not receive full praise for making a lively and harmonious stroke.

Literati painters give a second hint about concentration on paper by comparing their own practice to the Chinese game of go. Success

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[28] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art*, pp 45, 57.

[29] Yee Chiang, *Chinese Calligraphy, An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 167. In memory of Charles Chu, who recommended this text and shared, together with Bettie Chu, many spirited conversations about Chinese calligraphy, history, painting, and following the brush.

[30] Yee Chiang, *Chinese Calligraphy, An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 169.

in playing go requires attention to the whole board. If a player pays too much attention to particular stones in one isolated area, then the player neglects the unoccupied but commanding points that are essential to encompassing the widest territory possible. By analogy, the painter must remain attentive to the whole of the surrounding sheet of paper or territory and not overemphasize some particular subgroup of forms or brush strokes. When the aim is to make strokes that are naturally beautiful, the painter must be sure to place each stroke, first to last, with due consideration of the surrounding paper taken as a whole.

The third hint concerning the literati painter's concentration on paper can be found in Shi Tao's remarks on his one-stroke account of painting. Gao Jianping contributes here a valuable interpretation of Shi Tao: "According to Shi Tao, one-stroke is a simple visible fact as well as a metaphysical concept. He once explained one-stroke as 'the simple skill of applying the hand in doing calligraphy and painting'."[31] In short, the one-stroke method of painting includes the act of making a stroke. Gao appears to be referring to the following statement by Shi Tao: "Transformed strokes are the rudimentary ways of applying brush and ink."[32] Since the actual making of a stroke does indeed seem to include the simple and rudimentary visible activity of applying brush and ink to paper, we may use Gao's reading and conclude that the literati painter concentrates on the visible paper, brush, and ink, which are immediately at hand.

Taken together, these three clues allow us to take an important first step. The literati painter concentrates on paper for the sake of its empty space as a visible whole. Since the painter first looks or concentrates on visible paper without seeing or perceptually discriminating particular properties, we have a promising way to interpret a passage in the Dao De Jing, which is attributed to Laozi (570–490 BC, founder of Daoism), that is sometimes applied to painting: "the greatest image has no shape."[33] But how does concentration on paper for the sake of its simple space as a visible whole help us explain how Wen Tong observes himself as a pure self fused with environment? To answer this question, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's notion of interior flesh. The next

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[31] Jianping Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art*, p. 175, italics mine.

[32] E. J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting By Shih-T'ao*, p. 122.

[33] Laozi, *Dao De Jing, a Philosophical Translation,* eds. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballentine, 2003), p. 141, Chapter 41.

section requires each of us to observe our own sample of everyday contact with life.

Section Three: The Whole of the Visible: Embodiment, Transformation, Paper

We need to develop a meaning for 'visible whole', so that we can use this term to explain how the painter undergoes a transformation of self, a fusion of self with nature, and a similar transformation and fusion later on, while painting with ink and concentrating on the empty space of paper. Merleau-Ponty uses 'the visible' to designate an element that is both a sample of the painter's own corporeality and an observable place where the painter observes the intersection of self with nature. This context of the visible is available as a ground and pivot that enables the individual person to regard embodiment as a Gestalt: the painter can choose between two phases of interpretation for 'visible embodiment'. I argue in this section that Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'visible' to develop three points: the painter possesses a visible, innate, and non-objective ground of corporeality that supports changing visual experiences (e.g. duck, rabbit, bamboo, axe-stroke); this ground is an element of self that is inseparable from observable nature; and the painter can use line in such a way that the whole of visible paper becomes an emptiness that exemplifies this element of the painter's self-embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'the visible' to name a pre-cognitive whole and a spatiality prior to perceptions that sustains the individual person's own ever-changing visual experiences of existing natural objects and events. He claims that each of us who sees can always observe in an instant that our own vision of a natural object, process, or quality (e.g. a red coat, a patch of red, a stroke of ink) is present as a "precise form bound up with a certain wooly, metallic or porous configuration of texture."[34] Each visual experience takes the thinking human observer to the heart of the visible, a place that is, at least for oneself as the observer, a continuation of one's own sovereign existence. It is to such an ultimate sensible context to which the 'the visible' refers.[35] For the seer, vision and this porous visible context never

[34] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 147.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 135, 138.

merge; for if they did, visual experience would vanish instantly due to the "disappearance of the seer or the visible."[36] The echoing of Kant is intentional and unmistakable; but Merleau-Ponty makes this indirect reference so that he can underscore the radical difference. According to Kant, without concepts, no object is thought or experienced; and without some observable and independent contribution from the senses, concepts are empty and existence is lacking. However, Kant seems to take this basic contribution of the senses for granted; indeed, he openly suggests that if we were to look for the sensory contribution (which by his own account is essential for going outside one's own conceptual thinking and ascribing existence to an object), it would still remain nothing to us (i.e. not experienced as an object), until some concept is imposed through thinking and we begin to experience some object in a determinate form.[37] It is precisely here that Merleau-Ponty offers an innovative contribution: he claims that the context of visibility remains observable, even in the absence of conceptual thinking and thus also in the absence of perceptual experience of natural objects and events in the phenomenological world. Speaking for myself, I do notice such an observable texture, a ground of visibility displaying a slight sparkle, grain, or shimmer; it persists no matter what sort of natural object comes to be or passes away within my visual perception. Indeed, it persists even when I close my eyelids. Do you not observe such a context or grainy texture accompanying the objects and events that you see? Look for yourself. In short, Merleau-Ponty initiates a use of the term visible so that each of us may refer to our own singular and peculiar sample of an observable ground that is itself never visually perceived as an object.

The second point of importance is that the whole of the visible is itself a sample or token of the seer's own embodiment. Merleau-Ponty uses language to aid us, so that each may take notice of a thickness that is evident only in our own case: "Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things."[38] The point here is that the same porous texture that sustains and displays natural objects is also an

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

[37] For Kant's tendency to regard the contribution of sensibility as an element of appearance that is nothing to us, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin's Press, 1929), p. 144.

[38] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 132-133.

exemplar of one's own flesh. He is not using 'flesh' here to refer to perceptible objects, physical functions, or material conditions (e.g. the implicit referents for the informal term 'flesh and bones'); instead, he is referring to the tissue or porous texture and an interior visibility that is a first elemental dimension present before the experience of objects or processes. He stipulates that 'flesh' refers, in this discussion, to the element of visibility that is present in every visual Gestalt that one witnesses for oneself; the Gestalt that one sees "has a weight that doubtless fixes it not in an objective site and in a point of objective time, but in a region, a domain … where it is everywhere present without one ever being able to say: it is here."[39] What is this dimension or medium of flesh that is everywhere present but not 'here' in the way that objects are? Is this flesh an idea then? Or merely a cognition or feeling about what is possible? Merleau-Ponty answers by reporting on what he observes for himself:

> No. It is a body. My body is a Gestalt and it is co-present in every Gestalt. It is a Gestalt; it also, and eminently, is a heavy signification, it is flesh …The flesh of the Gestalt (the grain of the color, the indefinable something that animates the contour) is what responds to its inertia, to its insertion in a "world"[40]

To put this in another way, Merleau-Ponty is insisting that he sees particular Gestalts within his own flesh, that is, by looking at the total visible (or visible whole) that animates, nourishes, and makes observable, at least for him, the coming to be and passing away of visual experiences of particular patterns and figures. The grainy context that animates any given contour is a total visible, everywhere present, which inserts the Gestalt (e.g. the duck-rabbit figure) into a world that is his own body. Can anyone else observe the visible context that Merleau-Ponty claims to observe in his own case? No. Since each corporeal sample is never given as an object of perception, each person who witnesses such a visible whole looks at a secret inwardness hidden from everyone else! Merleau-Ponty grants this and even insists on it: "each of us has a private world;" his visual perceptions open on a private world that is in a recess of a body.[41] When I look for myself at some mountain, river or tree, I do observe that the natural objects I see (or seem to see) are exhibited within a whole of visibility. Moreover,

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[39] *Ibid.*, p. 205.
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

I willingly infer that this whole, this total visible, does indeed belong to my corporeal life since it surely belongs to my senses and not merely to my mind, thoughts, feelings, or imagination. Do you not observe a wholeness of visibility in your own case? Although none of us can observe the simple sample possessed by the other, I suspect none of us would say to the other (without laughing) that the other's claim to observe the actuality of such an animating and secret whole is an illusion since no one can authenticate anyone else's claim to observe such a sample. Furthermore, whenever I try to believe that the innate and observable whole of visibility (right before my eyes) is nothing at all since it is neither an object of visual experience nor a condition named by the natural sciences, then I delude myself. I will break my pledge—also my modern pledge—to accept and to rely on the evidence of my own senses, whenever I deny my own observation of the very ground of visibility that enables me to go outside concepts and to ascribe actual existence to the natural events that I would otherwise only conceive of as possibilities. The total visible that gives an animating texture to my own perceptions of visual objects is private, innate, and corporeal.

Given that 'the visible' may refer in this way to an observable sample of innate corporeality, the painter can choose between two phases in the interpretation of embodiment. The animating whole of visibility becomes one sole circular course of embodiment that can be interpreted in two phases.[42] On the first phase, each of us takes our own incomparable token of visibility for granted, even though it is always present. None of us takes notice of our own sample of visibility for its own sake since we are usually preoccupied with some interest in learning a new physical technique or in carefully perceiving the motions and relations between different natural objects and processes (e.g. fingers, paper, round, tilt, press, hook, petal). However, each of us can always switch to the second phase and observe the animating whole of visibility right before our own eyes as a sample of our own peculiar self-embodiment. It is here that Merleau-Ponty's sentence—'My body is a Gestalt and it is co-present in every Gestalt'—takes on meaning. Since there are two phases in the interpretation of embodiment, it is a mistake for philosophers to interpret the individual person exclusively in terms of a bundle of experiences that occur within the box that is the physical body. The whole of visibility that I notice on the second

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

phase is not here and now in the same way as the natural objects (e.g. my hand, the brush) that I perceive and experience on the first phase are; nevertheless, this visible context is neither supersensible nor assigned to some invisible noumenal dimension, since it is itself the very ground that inaugurates the where and the when and that lets facts have meaning. On the second phase, I observe in visible nature a corporeal place, a whole of my own, which I can never experience as an event subject to the causal laws of the natural sciences. Do you not observe in your own case such a reversibility of the flesh and these two phases in the interpretation of embodiment? Between the colors and visible things for which you are an eye witness, do you not also find an animating texture that sustains them, nourishes them, and that is not itself a thing but instead your own latent sample of flesh that is ready to reveal the existence of things?[43]

Through this principle of the reversibility of the flesh, each of us may acquire ostensively a new meaning for the term 'self'. By switching to the second phase of interpretation for embodiment, one notices that the visible world begins to fold back within itself in a way that creates a self-awareness of one's own "central cavity of the visible."[44] With this folding back of the dimension of the visible, the secret dimension of self-embodiment is revealed to the painter. Each of us can in this way authenticate the more general idea of the individual person as a "sensible for itself."[45] It is at this stage that the thought of a secret and non-objective dimension of the whole of visibility becomes a live hypothesis and advantageous for philosophy. For on the second phase, each of us notices a sample of self-embodiment that leads to the idea that our own self is a compound of two elements: thinking and visibility (e.g. spirit and body). As a result, each of us has immediate evidence for saying that there is a visible whole—simple, ultimate, relatively stable—that "traverses me and constitutes me as a seer."[46] Thus, inwardness is a compound or a composite, where each of us

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[43] Talk of inwardness as an innate whole of the visible may seem odd at first. But consider entopic phenomena within the eye, such as those denoted by the term 'floaters'. My ophthalmologist agrees that the floaters that I observe are caused by transparent fibers in each eye that block incoming light and cast shadows on the tissues of my physical retinas. Just as I would expect, each retina of my physical body is associated with—or lends me—an innate corporeal whole of the visible, within which I see these shadows for myself.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

[46] *Ibid.* p, 140.

observes the interaction of our cognitive understanding with our own innate, nonobjective, corporeal whole of visibility that is never itself visually perceived as a natural object.

It is a small step for us to infer that the practicing painter possesses and witnesses a compound self that includes an observable visible whole, a corporeal element, which offers a pre-objective place for exhibitions of nature and environment. The whole of visibility that serves as a non-objective sample of self-embodiment is the very same whole that is inseparable from environment and the perception of, say, bamboo. Each of us possessing our own token sample of the gift of the visible has intimate and immediate contact with natural life simply by looking: "the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeality; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication."[47] By oscillating between the two reversible phases of interpretation for embodiment, the painter who sees bamboo as an object can begin to migrate corporeally and to notice that the bamboo is displayed within the wholeness of painter's own 'total visible'. Merleau-Ponty describes how the painter who observes nature undergoes such a reversal and oscillates between cognizing judge and receptive pupil of the visible:

> …as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things. My activity is equally passivity—which is the second and more profound sense of narcissism: not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of the body that one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows that there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it.[48]

There is perceiving for oneself the location of one's physical body, just as others may see and measure it for themselves; and there is emigrating for oneself into the visible (within which objects appear) and finding that it is inseparable from the corporeal whole that is one's own innate token of flesh. As a working painter, there is a way for me to observe that I myself actually am the visible texture that sustains the natural objects existing right before my eyes. This gives me some idea

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 135.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

of how Wen Tong could observe his body transform into bamboo, or how Berleant observes himself as continuous with the wholeness of nature that is not an object. For Merleau-Ponty, "the role of the painter and the visible switch;" the manifest visibility of external objects experienced through vision is now "repeated in the body by a secret visibility. 'Nature is on the inside,' says Cezanne."[49] Depending upon needs, interests, and cultural custom, the individual person will be more or less likely to exercise this capacity for reversing his own awareness of embodiment and for observing his own emigration into the whole of visibility that provides evidence of the self's own unique intersection with nature.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty explicitly links this notion that the visible is a sample of self-embodiment with an account of the painter's concentration on paper for the sake of its empty space. He offers the example of Matisse, who uses line to create disequilibrium within the white paper that ultimately leads to the opening up of paper as a hollow within which natural objects appear. Matisse uses line to convey form, but he does so in a way that gives equal emphasis to paper as a sample of constitutive emptiness that is co-present with the line.

> It is Matisse who taught us to see his shapes not in a 'physical-optical' way but rather as structural filaments, as the axes of a corporeal system of activity and passivity. Whether it is representational or non-representational, the line is no longer a thing or an imitation of a thing. It is a certain disequilibrium contrived within the indifference of the white paper; it is a certain hollow opened up within the in-itself, a certain constitutive emptiness [un certain vide constituent]—an emptiness which … sustains the supposed positivity of things. The line is no longer the apparition of an entity upon a vacant background … [It is] the modulation of a pregiven spatiality.[50]

This passage occurs during Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the innate and secret visibility lent by one's own body, so the message is clear: Matisse uses line to emphasize paper for the sake of the constitutive emptiness of the whole of the visible, which serves as an observable hollow of self-existence during the second phase of interpretation for embodiment. Thus, the concentration on paper can give the painter a sample of the pregiven whole of visibility that is a corporeal element of

[49] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," p. 129.
[50] *Ibid.* p. 144.

the self. We can, then, think of how Wen Tong can observe his own migration into the visible whole of the paper when he begins painting.

Gathering our results, we may conclude that Merleau-Ponty offers the rudiments of a philosophical language for describing how the whole of the visible serves as an observable place within which the painter can observe the fusion of self with environment. The idea of the living person as a sensible for itself gives us a viable way to interpret the claim that the painter (purified or emptied of perceptions) is still able to observe a corporeal element of self that is inseparable from environment. Thus, the three features—suspension of perception, transformation into a pure self, and fusion with self and nature—cohere. Moreover, we can now appreciate the importance of Gao Jianping's reading of Shi Tao, on which the one-stroke process of painting is the visible application of brush and ink to paper; for Gao's emphasis on the visibility of ink and paper makes it easier for us to combine Shi Tao's account of making literati brush strokes with Merleau-Ponty's claim that the painter can observe paper for the sake of its constitutive emptiness and thus as a sample of visibility and self-embodiment.

Section Four: Literati Strokes: Shi Tao, Visible Paper, and Intersection with Nature

With the idea that there are two phases of interpretation for the visible, we can affirm all five features associated with the making of literati brush strokes. During walks in nature, the literati painter perceives natural objects and then switches to the second phase of interpretation of embodiment to become bamboo. Later, in the studio, the painter can experience hand, brush, and paper as distinct objects; however, in an instant, the painter can also concentrate on the empty space of paper for the sake of the whole of the visible so that brush strokes may exhibit a beauty similar to that observed in nature. This oscillation helps to explain a claim that Gao attributes to Shi Tao, namely, that the literati painter's mental strategy, yi, remains obscure until it is brought out or opened up through concentration on paper and the visible act of making brush strokes.

We can begin to account for the personal reports by Su Shih and Shi Tao. With regard to Su's poem about Wen Tong's painting practice, we may now say that Wen Tong perceives the bamboo as a natu-

ral object; however, he is also able to observe that bamboo appears within the whole of the visible that is an observable element of corporeality within his own innate composite self. Later, Wen retrieves yi and watches as each stroke creates and animates (or recreates and reanimates) a particular form of bamboo, insect, or mountain, within the whole of visibility presented by paper. In a sense, through a skillful use of ink, Wen can relive the fusion of his own body with bamboo that he observes during walks; he concentrates on the empty space of paper and watches as it takes the shapes of bamboo. This fusion of self with the whole of visibility explains Shi Tao's claim that he communicates on behalf of mountains: They are in me and I am in them.

Modern doubts and objections about the five features disappear. The process of painting remains a corporeal one for the literati painter, even though perceptions of natural objects are continually suspended. There is now an interpretation for aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty and environment, on which the five features under discussion are compatible. Nothing I have written here challenges the modern claim that visual experiences of objects and events never occur without concepts. But I claim that it is no myth that the painter can drop an interest in perceiving objects and take up an interest in observing the non-objective, corporeal sample of the whole of the visible for its own sake. It is no myth that one can, as a working painter, undergo a transformation of awareness and actually observe, at least for oneself, the corporeal element of one's own composite self, even while one suspends visual perception, experiences of objects, and cognitive thinking. For each sensible for itself, there is an innate and observable element of self-existence (e.g. the visible) that is prior to experience. It follows that Peng Feng is quite correct: the ideas of Chinese aesthetics, including the five features of literati painting, do not revive the idea of the myth of the given, which is the very different idea that the senses deliver experiences and perceptions directly and without conception.[51]

G. E. Moore's objections against naturalistic accounts of aesthetic appreciation are avoided. According to Moore, we must not commit what he calls the naturalistic fallacy. This fallacy occurs when someone observes that some natural object or quality of a particular type is beautiful or good and then moves to conclude that natural objects and

[51] Peng Feng, "Aesthetic Experience as Present Experience: One Dimension of Chinese Aesthetics," p. 64.

qualities of that kind may be used to define 'beautiful' and 'good'.[52] Someone who defines 'beautiful' by brush strokes of one type, e.g. axe-cut but not flying white, would commit the naturalistic fallacy. However, Merleau-Ponty's corporeal principle is not naturalistic in Moore's stipulated sense; it does define 'the visible' by denoting any object, event or functional relation within the subject matter of the natural sciences and psychology. The terms 'the visible', 'total visible' and 'constitutive emptiness' refer to an obvious but secret sample of a visible whole that can never be identified with any particular visible natural objects or qualities that are experienced within it. I welcome with enthusiasm a suggestive claim that Moore himself advances on the topic of aesthetic appreciation: if some natural object is beautiful, then it must appear as both part and essential element of some whole that is intrinsically good. I propose that we use "whole of intrinsic value" in reference to the whole of the visible, as Merleau-Ponty describes it. It would follow that a natural object is beautiful for a person, whenever the person chooses to observe, by reversing the two phases of interpretation, that the object appears as both part and essential element of the innate whole of the visible that is of intrinsic value for that person. The literati brush stroke is observed as naturally beautiful, when the painter succeeds in using ink to animate paper for the sake of the whole of the visible, a place where the thinking self can observe its own fusion with an innate corporeal sample of nature. There is a sense in which any natural object can be appreciated as aesthetically good and naturally beautiful, since it is always possible for a person to notice that a natural object is a part of the immediate visible whole of intrinsic value.

What of Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim that the private naming of sensations cannot occur? What of the argument that one cannot know that one has used the word 'beetle' correctly only from looking at the beetle in one's own box that no one else can see into? Merleau-Ponty does indeed look into his own private world to observe a secret visibility. Does a reading of Wittgenstein lead us to conclude that whatever Merleau-Ponty means by 'visible' or 'innate visible whole' cannot be an object in a language game? Even if Merleau-Ponty himself uses 'visibility' to report a something, is it not the case that for all we know his interior monad could be empty? So, a critic might continue, is it not the case that references to such an innate visible whole cancel out,

[52] G. E. More, *Ethica Principia* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1988), pp. 9-10, 201.

whatever it may or may not be, just as Wittgenstein would seem to suggest? In reply, I grant that on Merleau-Ponty's account each of us must look at a sample of visibility in our own private monadic world (monde privee) in order to determine ostensively the meaning of 'the visible', 'total visible', and 'wholeness of the visible'. But I suggest that there is no contradiction with Wittgenstein's argument. Wittgenstein is very precise about what he regards as impossible: "if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant."[53] I take Wittgenstein's point to be this: if we are interested in a philosophy that is based on the model of knowing particular kinds of things and objects, then we will dismiss as irrelevant any first-person statement from a human participant, whether Shi Tao, Merleau-Ponty, myself, or you, who claims to observe something in a private interior. In the case of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of flesh, it is correct to say that use of the term 'secret whole of visibility' gives no information about any objects of experience that lead him to use the term. When one looks at one's own secret sample, one does not come to know what the visible is by waiting for others to agree that one uses 'visible' correctly; one's own token or sample is not an object of experience or knowledge. Yet, speaking of it is not irrelevant, and I can never grant that the visible drops out as irrelevant in my own case, e.g. when I look for myself and rely on it [the visible] to ascribe existence to some natural object that contributes to my correct use of a term in some object language. Here the point of disagreement becomes clear: the language that Merleau-Ponty brings to philosophy is not irrelevant to conversation in which all of us as self-aware individuals discuss with each other our own observations of self-embodiment, self-existence, self-awareness of freedom, our inseparability from others observed in the visible wholeness of environment, and our moral commitment as a community to each sensible-sentient (or sensible for itself) possessing a similar interior whole of intrinsic value.

Chinese literati painters and art critics have left us ideas about painting, self, and inseparability from nature that may help us reshape present-day aesthetics. Merleau-Ponty's second and postmodern phase of interpretation of embodiment, which enables us to articulate an innate and observable corporeality, is a linguistic tool that enables

[53] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan: 1968), pp. 100-101; see paragraphs 293-298.

us to affirm the five features that Chinese literati painters mention with regard to making strokes of natural beauty. The value of this account of the process of literati painting for painter and onlooker begins to emerge. During a suspension of perception and the shift to the second phase of interpretation of embodiment, the painter does concurrently lose the capacity to know the world in terms of material conditions and existing objects of experience. However, the compensation for this loss and for switching to the second phase of interpretation for embodiment is priceless: the painter can renew acquaintance with the context of visibility and begin to appreciate it for its own sake. This observable, innate and irreplaceable intersection of self and nature is outside conceptualization and therefore not perceptible as an object conditioned by forces known to the natural sciences or psychology. Such results suggest that advances may emerge today from a renewal of interest in such topics as natural beauty, the inseparability of self and nature, and our aesthetic appreciation of beautiful brushstrokes and environments. Thus, Peg Brand is correct when she suggests that cultural theorists will lose the benefit of promising talk if they define 'beauty' negatively against prevailing power (e.g. as dangerous, transgressive, and uncontrollable) and dismiss aesthetics as an outdated language for patriarchal values that are transcendental, disembodied, and an obstacle to accounts of the actual life of the individual person in nature.[54] The confluence here of traditional Chinese aesthetics and Merleau-Ponty's innovative language for embodiment strongly suggests that philosophers working in comparative aesthetics will make promising contributions to cultural studies.

The practice of literati painting shows traces of the working painter's awareness of a whole of visibility that is the place of the painter's own intimate intersection with nature, stars, mountains, and brush strokes. We have a new way to interpret the claim that in making a brush stroke the literati painter manifests the self. The philosopher of art should accept the language of aesthetic appreciation based on intrinsically valuable wholes of visibility, since this will help each of us to live from our own most intimate contact with actual life in nature and not merely from our representative knowledge of it.

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[54] Peg Zeglin Brand, "Introduction: How Beauty Matters," in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 6.

PATHS TO THE MIDDLE: A TENTATIVE THEORY FOR CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART

Peng Feng

Chinese contemporary art can be divided into three stages: *following the Other*, *being valuated by the Other*, and finally *getting its identity*.[1] Only in the third stage can Chinese contemporary art have its self-awareness or self-understanding, i.e., can Chinese contemporary art realize itself as Chinese contemporary art. However, according to Hegel and Danto, the history of art is at an end as soon as art has realized itself. By the same token, does Chinese contemporary art come to an end since it has realized itself in the third stage? Does *art* or *Chinese* or *contemporary* come to an end? What is the difference between them? If *art* comes to an end, it, according to Hegel and Danto, is sublated into philosophy.[2] If *Chinese* art comes to an end, it, according to the scholars who advocate trans-cultural aesthetics, is substituted for by a new International Style.[3] If *contemporary* art comes to an end, it, according to the scholars who advocate evolutionary aesthetics, welcomes "the return of beauty".[4] I propose to discuss the first issue in this paper and leave the others for other papers.

If what comes to an end is not *Chinese* but *contemporary* art, it should be sublated into Chinese traditional philosophy. Ironically, once contemporary art takes shelter in Chinese traditional philosophy, it can refuse to come to an end and welcome a new beginning. With

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[1] Li Xiaofeng, "Preface for *Chenxiang* Exhibition," in *Chenxiang* Catalogue (Shanghai: Shanghai Shipingxian Gallery).

[2] See Stephen Davies, "End of Art," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, Edited by D. Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 138-141.

[3] See Curtis Carter, "Conceptual Art East and West: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?," in *Aesthetics and Culture: East and West*, Edited by Gao Jianping & Wang Keping (Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Press), 2006, pp. 544-562; Curtis Carter, "Art without Cultural Borders: Reflections on Qin Feng's Art," in *Qin Feng: To Badashanren*, Catalogue (Beijing: Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), pp. 83-84.

[4] See Wolfgang Welsch, "The Return of Beauty?" *Pilozofski Vestnik*, No.2 (2007), pp. 15-25; Dennis Dutton, "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, edited by Jerrold Levinson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 693-704.

the new beginning, Chinese contemporary art would follow its special tradition, resolve its present problems, and, finally, save art from death. Artists and theorists should work together to deal with these issues. Here theory should not be understood under the 'wrapper' model whose motivating ideal is perfect coverage, but as dialectics or pragmatism whose purpose is not only to interpret but also to change the world.[5] From my perspective, the theory of *xiang* or *yixiang*, which is the core of Chinese traditional thought on art, can help our thinking about these issues.

The traditional Chinese division of ontological categories is a trifurcation, *Dao, Xiang,* and *Qi*, which is different from the standard bifurcation in western metaphysics**.** The ontology of works of art is one important topic in contemporary analytic aesthetics. According to these standard divisions, we cannot clarify the ontological status of works of art. But if we take the trifurcation in Chinese philosophy, the problem of the so-called ontology of works of art can be easily resolved. In short, a theory based on *Xiang* can not only link up with the tradition, but can also make constructive dialogues with contemporary analytic philosophy and phenomenology. An art based on *Xiang* can save art from its death. Chinese contemporary art should display or already has displayed the paths to *Xiang*, the middle.

1

Let me begin with the intractable problem of the ontological status of works of art. The ontology of art is a hot potato that attracts and agonizes the scholars engaged in it. The central question for the ontology of art, as Amie Thomasson summarizes it, is this:

> What sort of entities are works of art? Are they physical objects, ideal kinds, imaginary entities, or something else? How are works of art of various kinds related to the mental states of artists or viewers, to physical objects, or to abstract visual, auditory, or linguistic structure? Under what conditions do works come into existence, survive, or cease to exist?[6]

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[5] See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 40.

[6] Amie L. Thomasson, "The Ontology of Art," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, edited by Peter Kivy (Malden, Oxford, and Carlton: Blackwell, 2004), p. 78.

Let's take painting as an example. According to western metaphysics, purported entities are divided into mind-independent physical objects, on the one hand, and merely imaginary objects, projected properties, or entities that exist only in the mind, on the other hand. Obviously, these standard divisions leave no room for entities such as paintings. Painting can neither be simply identified with mind-independent physical objects nor be treated as merely imaginary objects. The entities of painting, which are materially constituted by physical objects but are also dependent on forms of human intentionality, seem to fall between these standard categories. Thomasson concludes:

> In short, to accommodate paintings, sculptures, and the like, we must give up the simple bifurcation between mind-independent and mind-internal entities, and acknowledge the existence of entities that depend in different ways on both the physical world and human intentionality.[7]

The problem of the status of works of art forces us to "return to fundamental metaphysics, to rethink some of the most standard bifurcations in metaphysics and develop broader and finer-grained systems of ontological categories"[8], in a word, to open the system of ontological categories to accept entities that exist in between such category bifurcations. The study of the ontology of works of art can touch a fundamental problem of metaphysics and benefit our understanding not only of works of art but also of other social and cultural objects. As Thomasson writes:

> A careful consideration of the ontology of art has impact and applications far beyond aesthetics … Developing a more adequate ontology of works of art may also lay the groundwork for a more adequate ontological treatment of social and cultural objects generally, which are so often neglected in naturalistic metaphysics … In short, if, rather than trying to make works of art fit into the off-the-rack categories of familiar metaphysical systems, one attempts to determine the categories that would really be suitable for works of art as we know them through our ordinary beliefs and practices, the payoff may lie not just in a better ontology of art, but in a better metaphysics.[9]

Now, finally, what are the entities that exist in between the category bifurcations? How should we develop the 'broader and finer-grained

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[7] Ibid., pp. 88-89. Citation from p. 89.
[8] Ibid., p. 88.
[9] Ibid., p. 90.

systems of ontological categories'? Thomasson raises the questions, but she does not give answers.

2

The problem of the ontology of the work of art seems to be not very elusive in Chinese aesthetics since the standard division in Chinese metaphysics is not bifurcation but trifurcation. Chinese metaphysics divides the entities into *Dao*, *Xiang*, and *Qi*, According to the standard bifurcation we can say that *Dao* is roughly the same as an abstract or mental object, and *Qi* is more or less the same as a concrete or physical object. These standard divisions leave no room for *Xiang*. Here *Xiang* cannot be understood as figure, form, or contour line as it usually is. It is not a *thing-in-itself* or *being-so* or a *thing-in-knowledge* or *appearance*, but a *thing-in-appearing* or *presence*. *Xiang* should be interpreted as the common act of viewing and being viewed or of seeing and manifesting, which is the dynamic state of appearing or perceiving.

Let me borrow a story from Wang Yangming to interpret *Xiang* in detail:

> The master (Wang Yangming, 1472-1529) was roaming in Nanzhen (the Kuaiji Mountain in present Zhejiang Province). A friend pointed to a flowering tree on a cliff and said, "[You say] there is nothing under heaven external to the mind. This flowering tree on the high mountain blossoms and drops its blossoms of itself. What has it to do with my mind?" The master said, "Before you look at this flower tree, it and your mind are in the state of silent vacancy. As you come to look at it, its colors at once appear clearly and vividly. From this you can know that this flower tree is not external to your mind."[10]

From an ordinary perspective, the dialogue between Wang Yangming and his friend seems to be quite strange. In our everyday life, we usually have neither the idea of a flower in the state of silent vacancy nor the idea of flower appearing clearly and vividly. The mind automatically conceptualizes the flower with the name of, for example, peach-blossom, pear-blossom, chrysanthemum, cotton-rose, azalea, and so on, all of which can be easily found in the mountain where Wang and his friends roamed.

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[10] *Wang Yangming Corpus* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1992), Vol. 1, pp. 107-108.

Let us suppose the flowering tree that Wang Yangming and his friends looked at is a cotton-rose. Now we properly have three kinds of cotton-rose: cotton-rose in the state of silent vacancy, cotton-rose appearing clearly and vividly, and cotton-rose with the 'cotton-rose'. We use the cotton-rose with the name 'cotton-rose' to denote the result of cotton-rose's appearing, that is, the representation or knowledge of cotton-rose. In short, the three kinds of cotton—rose can be named cotton-rose-in-itself (cotton-rose-so), cotton-rose-in-appearing, and cotton-rose-as-representation. According to Chinese aesthetics, an aesthetic object is not any cotton-rose-in-itself or cotton-rose-as-representation, but completely and fully cotton-rose-in-appearing.

Now, what is the difference between cotton-rose-in-itself, cotton-rose-in-appearing, and cotton-rose-as-representation? Briefly, cotton-rose-in-itself is a kind of tree. It is, for example, a tree three meters high, with complicated branches, green broadleaves, and pink flowers. We can take count of the number of the branches, touch the trunk, smell the flowers, and taste the leaves. We can also find many other properties or aspects in cotton-rose-in-itself, whether we know its name is cotton-rose or not. This kind of cotton-rose can exist outside one's mind, and might be in the state of silent vacancy.

Cotton-rose-in-appearing is cotton-rose in our perception or perceived cotton-rose, to borrow Wang Yangming's terminology, the cotton-rose appearing in the mind. When Wang said: "there is nothing under heaven external to the mind," he appropriately pointed out that we only have the cotton-rose appearing in the mind. We cannot have the cotton-rose-in-itself. It seems to be not very difficult for us to agree with Wang Yangming, since we cannot know anything before we perceive it. But the cotton-rose-in-appearing should not be misunderstood as something totally created by the mind. Here the mind should be understood as a mirror or theater, the metaphor we can easily find in the texts of Chan Buddhism, with or on which the cotton-rose manifests itself. So in many respects the cotton-rose-in-appearing is very close to the cotton-rose-in-itself. The only difference is the former is a perceived object and the latter is a presumed physical or natural object.

Actually Wang Yangming did not cancel the cotton-rose-in-itself but transformed it into the cotton-rose-in-appearing. In our ordinary experience it seems quite definite that we have the cotton-rose-in-itself because we can see, touch, smell, and, if we like, taste it. What is

the main difference between our ordinary opinion and Wang Yangming's profound insight? From Wang Yangming's perspective, which is mostly based on Chan Buddhist metaphysics, the cotton-rose in ordinary experience is not the real cotton-rose-in-itself but is the representation or illusion of a cotton-rose. We usually take some kind of representation of cotton-rose as the cotton-rose-in-itself. For example, today we are likely to take the scientific representation of cotton-rose as the cotton-rose-in-itself because modern science is dominant and is often privileged over other ideologies. The scientific representation is not the cotton-rose-in-itself but is the modern botanist's knowledge of cotton-rose. We have other representations of cotton-rose, there is, for example, that of Chinese traditional herbalist knowledge. From different perspectives we can get different representations or knowledge of cotton-rose. The privileged representation or knowledge of cotton-rose is often mistaken as the cotton-rose-in-itself.

What is the difference between the cotton-rose-in-appearing and the cotton-rose-as-representation? As to the cotton-rose-in-appearing, Wang Yangming simply said: "its colors at once appear clearly and vividly." He did not say he saw a different kind of color or even a different tree. Let us presume that we can see the same kind of color, for example, pink, in the cotton-rose at the moment. The difference between what Wang Yangming saw and what a botanist or herbalist sees is not different kinds of color, that is, for example, the difference between pink and red, but different states of the same color, that is, the difference between a pink in the state of vividly appearing and a pink in the state of silent vacancy or a pink in the state of determined knowledge. As we noted earlier, a pink [flower] in the state of silent vacancy is not a perceived object. However, a pink in the state of determined knowledge should be a perceived object or the object in perceiving. Since both a pink in the state of vividly appearing and a pink in the state of determined knowledge are perceived objects, one can rightly ask the question what is the difference between them. Briefly speaking, a pink in the state of determined knowledge was a perceived object, but now it is transformed into an object of thought or an abstract object that is not vivid and clear but determined and distinctive. We can think of an object of thought without the presence of our perceiving. On the contrary, a pink in the state of vividly appearing can last in the state of appearing, and our perception can linger in the state of perceiving. Therefore the appearing would be not trans-

formed into any representation, and the perception would be not transformed into any knowledge.

3

The problem of the ontology of works of art seems to be resolved. What is between the bifurcations of *Dao* and *Qi* is *Xiang*. *Xiang* is the soul of art.[11] Now the question is: how does an artist catch or create or express *Xiang* in his work? Or what exactly is the *Xiang* in the work? Here I want to cite Zheng Banqiao (1693-1765) to answer this question. On one of his paintings, Zheng wrote:

> During my stay in a riverside inn in a pleasant autumn, I got up one morning and walked out to see a bamboo grove. I found it poetically decorated with creamy mist, filled with fresh dew, and shaded with flowing sunlight. As I was there contemplating it, an inner drive to paint was stirred up and thus activated within myself. As usual the bamboo inside the mind was not the same as it was inside the eyes. Likewise, the bamboo drawn out by the hand was not the same as it was inside the mind, for it was transfigured when brought forth with ink on paper. In a word, the drive to paint precedes the act of painting itself, and this makes a regular principle or rule. Yet, a special taste beyond the conventional expertise is conducive to the momentum for artistic transfiguration. All this is peculiar of the art of painting.[12]

In Zheng's terminology, we have three kinds of bamboo: bamboo-inside-eyes, bamboo-inside-mind, and bamboo-drawn-out-by-hand (or, briefly, bamboo-inside-hand). Generally, bamboo-inside-eyes is what the painter sees of bamboo, and we can call it the bamboo of nature. Bamboo-inside=mind is what the painter thinks of bamboo, and we can call it the bamboo of the mind. And bamboo-inside-hand is what the painter paints of bamboo, and we can call it the bamboo of art or bamboo of culture. Understanding the relations among these three kinds of bamboo is the key to understanding Chinese art.

Chinese art does not aim at the imitation of nature, but Chinese artists strongly emphasize the importance of the observation of nature. Most Chinese artists only deal with familiar things. However, the bamboo of nature is not an object depicted directly by artists. The

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[11] For details, see Pang Pu, *Trifurcation*, pp. 232-235.

[12] Quoted from Ye Lang, *The Outline of Chinese Aesthetics* (*Zhongguo Meixueshi Dagang*, Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Press, 1985), p. 546. I am greatly indebted to Professor Wang Keping for translating this text into English.

directly depicted object of Chinese art is a bamboo of the mind. For example, if a Chinese painter wanted to paint bamboo, he would spend many years in trying to become familiar with the bamboo before beginning to paint it. But, as he begins to paint, he need not even look at the bamboo. He does not paint his seeing but his remembrance or thinking. Here we can see the obvious difference between nature and mind or between seeing and thinking in Zheng's statement that "bamboo-inside-mind was not the same as it was inside eyes." But I want to emphasize that the most important thing is not the differentiation but the inter-influence between nature and mind. On the one hand, nature seems to be spiritualized. This spiritualization makes bamboo more conspicuous by omitting some of its details. Spiritualization is a kind of simplification. It seems strange that since mind is not a duplicate of nature, the bamboo of the mind looks more like bamboo than the bamboo of the eye does. Here it is obvious that our thinking influences or even changes our visual perception. On the other hand, the natural fosters the mental. Since the painter has spent a long time familiarizing himself with nature to the extent that he almost indwells in nature, the way he sees it shapes the way he thinks about it. This inter-influence allows Chinese art to occupy a position between likeness and unlikeness, as opposed to simple or reductive likeness such as imitation and simple unlikeness such as abstraction.

In short, the bamboo of mind is the representation not only of the bamboo of nature, but also of the presence of the inner world of the painter himself. There is something more in the bamboo of mind than merely what we find in the bamboo of nature. By the same token, there is something more in the bamboo of art than what we find in the bamboo of mind.

Art is not simply an imitation, but a kind of language or symbolization.[13] Nelson Goodman's observation to this effect can find support in Chinese tradition. First and foremost, Chinese painting is a special form of symbolization. Chinese artists do not reject imitation *tout court*. They reject, rather, imitations that do not embody the mastery of the brush and ink techniques that characterize the language of Chinese art.[14]

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[13] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1976).

[14] See Zhou Yigui (1688-1722), *Xiaoshan Huapu*, in Ye Lang ed., *Zhongguo Lidai Meixue Wenku* vol. 15 (Beijing: Zhongguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu Press, 2002), p. 340.

According to Goodman, an object is an art object if its language contains five symptoms of the aesthetic: syntactic density, semantic density, relative repleteness, exemplification, and multiple and complex reference.[15] Jin Hao, a famous painter in the ninth century, shared with Goodman a similar understanding of art. According to Jin Hao, an object is a work of art only if its language bears some special characteristics, for example, its brushwork should have four appearances: vein, muscle, bone, and breath.[16] By the same token, we can see these four appearances of brushwork as the aesthetic symptoms of Chinese painting. But Goodman's theory of symbolization does not capture Chinese art completely. For Chinese art, language belongs to the *Ji* (skill) with which a painter executes his brushwork, while the highest aesthetic ideal is the realization of *Dao* (vivid meaning). If a painting's brush and ink do not possess the relevant meaning, the painting will be diminished.[17] Here we can find another inter-influence between mind and culture. On the one hand, if a painter wants to acquire the language of Chinese painting, such as competence with brush and ink techniques, he must be rigorously trained in the art's tradition. His mind, ultimately, must be transformed by this tradition. On the other hand, if the painter has mastered the pictorial language, he thereby possesses the freedom to express his inner world in and through that language, and the subtleties of brush and ink will take their meaning from his heart. We have analyzed inter-influence between nature and mind and between mind and culture, respectively. Now, is there inter-influence between culture and nature? If there is such inter-influence, how do we understand it? According to Zheng Banqiao and other Chinese artists, the key here is in the role of the executing hand, i.e. the body performance of the artist himself. The human body is not only a result of cultivation but is also a part of nature, and so the apparent conflict between culture and nature finds its intermediation in body. As we see in Chinese opera, the bodily movements of the performers are highly cultivated, while the performers are also asked to move their bodies as naturally or spontaneously as possible. In

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[15] Nelson Goodman, "What is Art?" in Thomas E. Wartenberg ed., *The Nature of Art: An Anthology* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2002), p. 207. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 252-255.

[16] Jin Hao, Bifa Ji, in Ye Lang ed., *Zhongguo Lidai Meixue Wenku* vol. 7 (Beijing: Zhongguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu Press, 2002), p. 552.

[17] See Bu Yantu, *Huaxue Xinfa Wenda*, in Ye Lang ed., *Zhongguo Lidai Meixue Wenku* vol. 15, p. 420.

short, as a result of cultivation, the body's movement should be conducted by rules or conventions on the one hand; and, on the other hand, as a part of nature, the body's movement should transcend those rules and perform in a natural, spontaneous way.

We have thus given an outlined interpretation of the three aesthetic dimensions—nature, mind, and culture—and their inter-influences in Chinese art. According to my understanding these dimensions overlap, intertwine, and depend crucially on each other, and bodily movement plays the most important role in maintaining this interdependence and balance. Now we can answer the question raised in the beginning of this section, namely, what is between the bifurcations of *Dao* and *Qi*. Artists catch or create or express *Xiang* by means of keeping balance or interdependence between nature, mind, and culture.

4

I have outlined a potential art theory based on *Xiang* in the above sections. Is this theory obviously outdated? I don't think so. However, I don't think we can revive Chinese traditional philosophy without creative transformation. What I want to say is that an art theory that absorbs the merits of Chinese traditional philosophy can help us to deal with some contemporary problems. (1) An art theory based on the concept of *Xiang* can resolve the problem of the ontology of works of art, which I have discussed in section 1 and section 2. (2) An art that absorbed some elements of Chinese traditional art can create the harmony or attunement between nature, mind, and culture, which I discussed in section 3. Here what I want to mention is that some of the problems in today's society come from losing this harmony or attunement.[18] Most of the 'ready' contemporary art just manifests or even exaggerates these problems. But an art that overcomes these problems should further contemporary art and the present avant-

[18] As Michael Sullivan writes, "'Attunement' is fundamental in Chinese thinking. Man must attune himself not only to nature but also to his fellow men, in ever-widening circles starting from his family and friends. Thus, in the past the highest ideal was always to discover the order of things and to act in accordance with it. …We will find that its characteristic and unique beauty lies in its expression of this very sense of attunement. It is one reason why Westerners, often with no other interest in Chinese civilization, collect and admire Chinese art with such enthusiasm." See *The Arts of China*, Fourth Edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 2.

garde. (3) An art or art theory that absorbs some elements of traditional Chinese art and aesthetics can rescue art from reaching the end or death that was introduced by Hegel in the early nineteenth century, was brought up again by Arthur Danto in the middle of the twentieth century, and has attracted considerable interest in recent years. I don't want to engage in the debate on this topic.[19] What I want to say is that if we think of art with an eye to other traditions of art, especially the Chinese tradition, the end of art seems not to be a real problem. The end of art mainly results from the idea of newness or creativity that is the core of western modern art. But this idea is not very important or is quite different in the Chinese tradition of art. According to Chinese philosophy, every day is a new day. Newness is not something we have to struggle for, but is something at our hand. The most important thing is not to do something new, but to keep the balance, harmony, or attunement between, briefly speaking, nature and man.

[19] For discussion, see Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor after Hegel*, James McFarland trans. (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

CURRENT STATE OF CHINESE ART*

Wang Chunchen

It's risky to talk about the current state of Chinese art because there is no unanimous idea about it. Differences in the idea about what the current state is may lead to even larger differences in conclusions about the art. But generally speaking, it is still possible to describe some facts about the current state of Chinese art.

I. *Creation Groups*

China has several art systems, and although they change and adjust continuously, at present they are: 1) painting academies, 2) military art creation teams, 3) the China Artists Association, 4) art institutes, 5) independent professional artists, and 6) amateurs. The first section of the paper has a brief description of each system.

First, the system of painting academies: they usually have government financing, and they have employees in fixed personnel posts who are popularly considered to be getting financial support from the government. Various genres of fine art creation such as traditional Chinese painting, oil painting, print, sculpture, and so on are made there, with no compulsory mission to create art. In the past, the employees had to create artworks for all kinds of social ceremonies, while at present they need only create several pieces of artworks for their academies each year with no fixed completion date. They usually stay at home to make their work. They will also create artworks if there are important national activities. The painting academies system in China can be divided into several levels: first is the national painting academy called the China National Academy of Painting, which was originally called the Chinese Painting Academy. It calls up in people the image of the imperial painting academy in the Song Dynasty since

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both of them seem to uphold the orthodox position. Then there are the provincial painting academies that can be found in nearly all the provinces in China. Finally, there may be painting academies in some districts or counties that gather a group of outstanding painters of that area.

Second, military art creation teams: all the arms of the service in China have fine art creation centers. They gather painters in the army who are grouped as active duty civilian soldiers and mainly make creations with military themes.

Third, the China Artists Association: it is led by the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and managed by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of CPC. There is a subcommittee of the artists association in each of the multi-level districts. Its upper level associations direct it. Between them there is no direct leading-subordinating relationship or personnel relationship, but a coordinative relationship when art activities are held. For instance, when the national art exhibition of China is held, the art association in each area will do the overall planning and liaison work, collecting artworks in its area and committing them to its upper association. Artworks evaluated and picked up in each province will be sent to the China Artists Association for further selection. After all of these procedures, artworks to be displayed in the national art exhibition will finally be determined. The national art exhibition is an activity held by the artists association every five years. Ten sessions have been held since the China Artists Association came into being. It is the biggest art exhibition in China, and the only exhibition with nation-wide scale. Having works displayed in the national art exhibition means fame for the artists. If you have artworks shown in the national art exhibition or win some awards in it, it will help in the improvement of your teacher's professional title or promotion in your work. Many managers of art associations in the multi-levels have such experiences. Generally there are several professional painters in the art association of each area, but the number is decreasing.

In the past there were mass art galleries in each district, county, and city with several professional painters in each. They were in charge of grassroots art activities helping to hold art exhibitions on Labor Day, the Children's Day, Army Birthday, or National Day and to organize art lovers in the area to make art. At present, nearly all the mass art galleries have changed their way of operation. No longer sponsored by the state, the galleries once leased some rooms as art training class-

rooms in order to survive. Now they have nearly disappeared and been forgotten by the people.

Fourth, art institutes: it was said that there were eight most famous art institutes in China: Central Academy of Fine Arts, Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now called China Academy of Fine Arts), Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, Hubei Academy of Fine Arts, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, and Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts. Now it is said that there are ten most famous art institutes, i.e., the above eight plus the Nanjing Arts Institutes and the Academy of Fine Arts in Tsing Hua University. There is a department of art in each of the normal universities in China. At the end of twentieth century when China was carrying out the reform of higher education, departments of art in the normal universities developed into academies of art, adding applied arts such as design. Now almost all the comprehensive universities have a department or an academy of arts to teach design and applied art because of the increasing need for interior design, product design, commercial design, print design, and the like. Another reason why most universities set up fine art specialties is that the fees for enrollment in the arts are much higher than they are for other majors. There are, therefore, financial reasons for the inflated increase of fine art departments in universities and colleges in China. The shortcomings of this are debated intensely by teachers and scholars.

A lot of fine arts teachers are in these academies and are commonly seen in the fine arts departments of the normal universities in China. They comprise a large fine arts creation team that has exerted a great influence on the art education of China. Most of the artists who graduated from the academies after 1978 received a complete traditional fine arts education. But since this was the time that China began to open to the outside world, some fine arts students whose concepts had changed in the new era created orthodox artworks that were different from their predecessors. They are gradually bringing some social concern and influence to their work.

Fifth, independent professional artists: In the context of China, the so-called free professional artists first referred to those who gave up the fixed jobs distributed by the state and made their living creating artworks. They were different from the painters mentioned above who work in the state-owned organizations and live on the wages paid by the state. Most graduated from the academies of fine arts. From the late 1980s, with the loosening of the social conditions in China and the

transformation of the social structure, there gradually appeared some artists who gave up public office and lived solely on selling their own artworks. They usually gathered at the outskirts of the cities in order to rent cheap rooms and make artwork reproductions on their slender economic incomes. They were considered 'three abstentions' people or elegantly called 'blind flow artists' because they had no fixed dwellings, incomes, and jobs. (Painting in rented rooms was not considered a job then). Yuanmingyuan Garden is the place where they first gathered and where the story of China's non-governmental art came into being.

Among them are many active artists who are well known nowadays. So it is the particular age that selected these people and at the same time changed the whole structure of the Chinese artworld. People creating art became increasingly diversified. Painters and artists who had mainly worked in the state-owned organizations had more choices. With the development of the social economy, large numbers of artists prefer to be professional artists. They form a group from members of all the social strata in China who strive for and rely on themselves. They form private companies that then have to manage their businesses independently and seek for all kinds of resources and opportunities. From the perspective of the probability of their survival, such artist groups face more pressure than other artists do. That is one of the reasons why a considerable number of artists continuously seek after their own style in order to survive.

At present, each year China has a number of graduates majoring in arts who become such free artists. Forming a large ecological chain, on the one hand, they are a consumer group that promotes new industry, for example, the development of art pigments, canvases, wood frames, tools, processing technology, calligraphy mounting, and workshop real estate industry. On the other hand, they are strong enough to promote established industry. Industries involved with printing, exhibitions, art galleries, auctions, collecting, maintenance, stock, transportation, and media are booming thanks to the large number of art productions and art activities.

Sixth, amateurs: this aspect should always be mentioned when talking about the current state of Chinese art. Though not professional artists, they have strong passion for and interest in art. They learn art and make artworks totally out of interest and for the cultural accomplishment, having the attitude that art need have no utility in their life. With the passage of time, some of them naturally become skilled art-

ists. Keeping the simplest beliefs about art, they can be considered a chain of continuous art heritage in China. It is a tradition of Chinese culture to consider painting and calligraphy as a way to cultivate the nature of the individual.

II. *Creation Concepts*

Accompanying different creation groups are different art creation concepts that sometimes stand in sharp opposition to each other. As a result of the developing process of Chinese art in the recent thirty years, they form the staggered and interactive system in which one is down when another is up. They can be classified as concepts that are orthodox and pioneering, traditional and contemporary, local and international, male and female, academic and non-academic, governmental and non-governmental, conservative and revolutionary, backward and progressive, and so on. Some concepts are certain, while some are not; some people hold one belief while some change their beliefs and positions continuously according to different conditions. Today, people in the academy may not have academic concepts, and independent artists may not hold contemporary concepts. Rather, the concepts they hold are the combination of various identities (academic or independent) and benefits. And also with the development of society and the change of various living conditions, people's concepts change. For instance, some people who were once explorers of Chinese pioneering art are now satisfied with keeping their conceptual schemes and codes with no wish for further development.

From art groups and art concepts we can clearly see the current interfluves of Chinese art from which different writing styles and positions on Chinese contemporary art history emerge. Seeing this is important and key for cognizing and sorting out Chinese art. Discussing whether art is good or bad is not suitable for the current state in which there are power discourses with certain purposes and ideologies hidden behind the different categories and concepts of art. Differences in concepts reflect the fact that a judgment about Chinese art in reality is not purely a judgment about art. This is the point that deserves particular attention when balancing and studying Chinese contemporary art.

III. *Art Zones*

Since 1990, places where free artists gather together have gradually appeared one after another, such as Yuan Ming Garden in the earlier time. Songzhuang Artist's Village formed in the middle 90s; Shangyuan Artist's Village in Beijing formed after 1996. These painters' villages are far away from the cities, with low rent and fresh air. So artists can gather there to make art quietly and seemingly to enjoy the carefree life in fairyland that was yearned for by people in ancient China. In the mid-1990s, the most lively and attractive place among them for young Chinese artists to be was Songzhuang. One after another artists rented rooms or bought houses in surrounding villages. This non-governmental artist community became a new social phenomenon in China that was reported by the media in China and abroad. Curators and collectors in and out of China continuously came to search for the non-governmental art. But they were limited to the art circle since these folk stories [about the existence and location of the independent artists] were circulated only among the artists. Reported by no media in China, they were even considered taboo for the media. Art exhibitions were continually forbidden, and artists and the government stood in opposite positions to each other; the government prevented artists from showing their work.

The Chinese art market started to boom after 2000. 798 Art Zone was born right away and attracted a lot of art galleries and art organizations in and out of China. As when oil is put on fire, the Chinese contemporary art boom kept growing. Then at the rural-urban continuum of the northeast outskirts of Beijing, artists' work areas such as Suojiafen, Feijiafen, wine factory, No.1 field, Caochangdi, Huantie, Jiangfu, Xiedao, Changdian, Nangao, Beigao, and Black Bridge appeared one after another. Most of these new art zones are owned by peasants or investors and rented to the painters and artists. However, in 2009 many of these art zones such as Zhengyang, 008, Dongying, Beigao, and so on were demolished so that the land could be used for real estate development. Many artists had to look for other possible cheap places to settle in to pursue their dream.

The rise of the art zones and gallery zones is closely connected with the leaping development of the Chinese economy. With the input of capital from various countries, as well as the change of the situation with the number of artists' work areas, people begin to be excited with so-called contemporary art. At the same time, the society, media, and

the government begin to embrace contemporary art with understanding and tolerance. Except for some extreme artworks, most of the fantastic works are accepted. All kinds of works get their own orientations and markets. This phenomenon demonstrates the maturity and openness of Chinese society and also the preliminary development and prosperity of the Chinese economy. But on the other side, since most of the art zones are located in Beijing, while only a small part are located in Shanghai or Chongqing, whose scale and influence are much smaller than those in Beijing, artists in China with great or little reputation move to Beijing to rent studios or buy houses. They choose Beijing as the main arena for art creation and sale because information, human resources, and various art resources are mostly concentrated and easiest to get there. Art community members in and out of China pile up in Beijing.

IV. *Art Exhibitions*

Art exhibitions here do not refer to daily exhibitions held in the galleries, but to large scale expositions, biennales, triennials, theme exhibitions, academic exhibitions, and art arenas, etc. They constitute a most important part in the ecological chain of Chinese contemporary art. However, there is still a margin and space for healthy growth so the exhibitions improve the maturity of the art system as well as promote the development of Chinese art and academic art. In Beijing there are Art Beijing gallery expositions, China International Art Exposition, and Chinese Art Exhibition that focus on the art gallery industry and art markets. There is a biennale emphasizing artistic dimensionality like the Beijing International Art Biennale organized by the government and held three times, but with no independent curatorial group, which is really to be regretted. In Shanghai there are the Shanghai Contemporary Exposition and Shanghai Biennale. In Guangzhou there is Guangzhou Triennial, in Nanjing there have been two triennials, and in Chengdu a biennale and other large theme exhibitions have been held.

Exhibitions like these are held by groups and individuals with different backgrounds in different areas, such as the Guiyang Biennale, Pingyao International Photography Festival, Guangzhou Photography Biennale, Beijing International Calligraphy Biennale, Shenzhen Biennale, Chinese Art Triennial, Macao Designing Biennale, Shenzhen

International Wash Painting Biennale, and Shanghai International City Sculpture Biennale. These exhibitions with a total number of over ten immediately turn China into the country where the most number of biennales are held. But still there are some problems: their themes are similar to each other; there is not enough new art; they lack influence, persistence, and authority; and there is sharp contrast between academic orientation and artworks. These problems that appear in the process of art's development need the efforts of more people to correct them. However, having these exhibitions is better than not having them. There are many people working on art who can be absorbed as art resources. The main problem is for all the biennales to find their own orientations and establish their own targets so as to continuously promote the development of a certain kind of art, rather than all of them being concerned with artworks that can occupy the business market or constantly repeat what has been done. The purpose of biennales is to promote the delivery of art, stimulate the birth of new thought, and seek out artists who have been neglected.

V. *Art Media*

Art media in China are also special. According to the official policy, communication media such as magazines and newspapers need examination and approval of the National Press and Publishing Ministry. Without it, any printed matter with commercial interest circulating in the society is illegal. Once bulletins and propaganda materials in any enterprise are printed and become the carrier of communication, they must be recorded. It is a way to control the direction of speech of the whole society. In the recent years, members of China's media industry are in furious competition. Many magazines and newspapers have stopped publishing or changed their contents. The National Press Ministry has also become stricter about the approval of publishing new magazines or newspapers. Instead of enlarging the scale, it tries to lessen the number and category of journals. Then in China journal publishing resources were lacking. On the one hand, there are a small number of journals, and, on the other, there are many new phenomena in China that need the attention and introduction of the media; but getting a journal publishing license is hard.

Maybe because all the situations in China are changing so fast, large quantities of details cannot be dealt with. Therefore a lot of directly

delivered or distributed printed matter appeared. Due to the blowout phenomenon of Chinese contemporary art, a lot of information, exhibition notices, and comments have to be published. But most of the existent publications cannot meet the demand of the rapid rhythm, and they are not fit to publish many artworks of contemporary art. The present publications approved by the government reject contemporary art, so new art media come into being. These print matters are sent free to people who want them. With a lot of exhibition information, artists' interviews, columns, market analysis, collection orientations, and new things about them, the directly delivered print material become the material from which information about contemporary art can be gotten rapidly. Though they all begin with a market operation that charges them publication and advertising fees and some are not good quality and lack authoritative importance, they do make up for the poverty of art information, reflect the fast changing rhythm of China's reality, and receive the welcome of society. More and more organizations and individuals have become involved in the upsurge of publishing art journals. In the past it was hard to manage a journal. There was this humorous saying: 'if you want someone to die, then ask him to manage a journal'. Now the upsurge of running art media is ongoing and the government is tolerant about it. The new art medium can be edited, printed, and distributed only if it does not break the rules made by the government.

At present there are two issues that deserve concern in the course of running any art media. One is that some journals begin to buy the right to use the periodical number of other journals. Many journals in China have no readers and lose money all the time, but their periodical numbers have not been canceled. They have to go on publishing because once they stop, they will be canceled by the Press and Publishing Ministry. Therefore the art media cooperate with the Ministry, using their periodical numbers and writing their names on the journal, but the name of the new editor is still the most important one. The owner of the periodical number should examine the periodical's content just to make sure that the new editor and publisher break no government rules. This is a kind of concession to the reality of publishing a journal in China. These folk art media want to wear a legal coat for their future development and to prevent their being canceled because of an illegal publishing procedure. Another issue is that lots of enterprises and speculation institutions in China and abroad have begun to get involved in the art media and invest money in them. They

consider it an adjustment or business development. It is also because of the lively situation of the Chinese art market at present that various capital investments to run art galleries or journals flow into the art market in large numbers.

VI. *Issues Concerned by Art*

The current state of Chinese art comes into a new period different from the periods that went before. Huge change 'contemporary art' becomes a popular phrase with special meaning as well as a concept debated endlessly by artists, critics, and theorists, but with no consistent understanding until now. This obviously demonstrates a state of contemporary art. There are several interpretations of the concept. One is that any work created at present can be called contemporary. But opponents argue that if that is so, the concept has no special meaning and there is no necessity to discuss its meaning and reference. However, a reason to accept it is that people don't want their works to be excluded from contemporary art. For example, painters making wash paintings in China are not willing to accept that their works do not belong to contemporary art.

Another problem with this interpretation is that it is not clear whether an abstract picture that dates back to the twentieth century in the west can be called contemporary art. There are different opinions about this. The modernity of the word 'contemporary' can be sensed from its frequent use in various names such as 'contemporary sculpture', 'contemporary oil painting', 'contemporary wash painting', 'contemporary abstract art' and 'contemporary photography'. Some people prefer to define contemporary art from the perspective of time. For example, in the west art after 1960s is called contemporary art, while in China, art after 1990s is called contemporary art. Personally I think this definition limits the domain of contemporary art since all the outstanding arts representing a time period should be considered as contemporary since the unspoken word of time consciousness is to find representations of outstanding art for each time period, no matter how distant it is. (So all art that currently speaks to its viewers is contemporary, no matter when it was made.)

Also some people distinguish contemporary art by its materials, for example, new media and digital artworks are contemporary art. Some people say that any genre or kind of art different from traditional and

modern art can be called contemporary, such as performance art, conceptual art, installation art, and land art, which are all nontraditional and non-modern. Another view is that contemporary art refers to art concerning modernity. Then what is modernity? It falls into a circular argument. Modernity is thinking and consciousness concerning contemporary issues. Then what is contemporary thinking and consciousness? It goes on and on like this.

Issues of concern in China now include: (1) Post-colonial issue. Are those big heads, big eyes, and bore heads made to cater to the west? Are those political symbols such as Mao Zedong and symbols of the Cultural Revolution and Tian'anmen for meeting the curiosity of the west because we are exhausted in thought? (2) Feminist art. Is there feminist art in China? Does feminist art necessarily have a connection with body? Is it feminist when a female artist paints herself as naked or paints a woman who is naked? (3) Performance art. Does performance art necessarily require the nakedness of the body? Is there an inevitable connection between performance art and physical injury? Why is bloody Chinese performance art banned? What's the real purpose of it? (4) Modern and postmodern. Should Chinese art develop toward modernism or postmodernism? What is the morphology of China's social structure? What is the art concerning this? Is contemporary art invalid at present? Are postmodern and contemporary art synonyms? (5) Art ideology. Is contemporary art closely related to ideology? Or modernist art? Is traditional art related to ideology? How are we to evaluate fine art in China's Cultural Revolution? How can we non-historicize it since it unlimitedly praised itself and considered itself an important part of Chinese art history? (6) Art language and form. Is this an issue of contemporary art? Should the language and form of art be studied at present? Is it true that talking about form is going backward? Then does abstract art have new meaning? (7) Media. Which kind of art represents contemporary art? Photography? Video? Digital? Which kind of art do we need? What is art for? (8) Art and the market. This is the hottest issue in China. The art market has influenced many people, including not only artists, but also people involved in art production, collection, evaluation, and education. It embraces art speculation as well as rules for the promotion of art development. Without the intervention of capital, Chinese contemporary art could not be as lively as it is today. But if only profit maximization is pursued, the healthy development of art will be seriously harmed and it

would not help artists to focus on art creation and innovation. That is what people criticize most.

Above is the description of only some phenomena. There are still other issues that can be introduced. For example, how to connect academic research with contemporary art, how art criticism plays its role, how to legislate to insure that the commercialization of art is rational, how does the development of Chinese art museums intervene in contemporary art, and how does Chinese contemporary art connect with the world, and so on. When we look over all of these, we find that the history we face is promising because we can foresee that in the future we will have more artists, although it would be an extravagant hope to expect the emergence of great artists.

At the same time it is certain that the current state of Chinese art is not perfect. It is full of contradictions and problems whose degree of sharpness creates an urgent need for people involved in art to make an effort to promote the real development of art, truly to realize the role of art in today's society, and to expand the diversification of art. Art with good quality is always hoped for and expected, and there must be those who will go in this direction in the future.

AVANT-GARDE IN CHINESE ART

Curtis L. Carter

The question that I propose to examine here is to what extent or in what sense there has been an *avant-garde* presence in Chinese art. And in what sense is the avant-garde present in contemporary Chinese art connected to *avant-garde* in the west. Before examining the relevance of the avant-garde to developments in Chinese art, it is necessary to provide a brief account of avant-garde in western art.

I

The term *avant-garde* is typically identified with developments in modern western art. In this context, the term has both an aesthetic and a societal aspect. At the core of aesthetic avant-garde art is improvisation. Improvisation challenges and seeks to replace existing hierarchal systems of artistic creation. It invites new concepts including open form, inviting change and the possibility of replacing repetition of traditional forms and preset structures. Understood in this context, improvisation is a means of suppressing historical consciousness. In suppressing historical consciousness, avant-garde practices serve to break the chain of reliance on existing artistic conventions and thus encourage the discovery of new ideas. With improvisation, there is the hope that artists will discover what could not be found in merely relying on existing artistic practices.

There exists an extensive body of writings on the western aesthetic *avant-garde*. Among these are the writings of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Rosalind Krauss, and others.[1] Krauss, who pro-

[1] Clement Greenburg, "Culture in General: Avant-garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical* Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, University of Minnesota Press, 1984; Harold Rosenberg, "Avant-garde," in *Quality,* edited by Louis Kronenberger (New York: Atheneum, 1969) pp. 418-449; Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), p. 156. Hal Foster argues against "a premature dismissal of the avant-garde" noting that critical theory of the middle 1970s was itself a secret continuation of the

posed abandonment of the term *avant-garde* as a useful concept for interpreting art after modernism, understood the *avant-garde* as being grounded in a discourse of originality related to modernism. According to Krauss, modernism centered on the *avant-garde* offered new beginnings in the history of art especially from the early twentieth century to the 1970s. She argues that its role has now ended as a result of certain critical practices beginning in the 1970s with the demythologizing of criticism and the emergence of postmodernist art in the late twentieth century.

Differences between proponents of the *avant-garde* based on aesthetic considerations and the proponents of art in support of radical social change have existed since the early nineteenth century, as reflected in the writings of Henri Saint-Simon, (1760-1825), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and others. A form of the social *avant-garde* was introduced in the early nineteenth century in the writings of Henri de Saint-Simon, who saw art and the artists as agents of social change.[2] Baudelaire wrote in 1851 condemning the "puerile utopia of the art-for-art school," praising instead the writings of a worker-poet Pierre Dupont who wrote expressing humanitarian themes.[3]

With respect to its societal meanings, Peter Bürger writing in the late twentieth century represents the social *avant-garde* as an antidote to the dissociation of art from the praxis of life in a bourgeois society. Following Jurgen Habermas, Bürger understands the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century as an attack on art, which he believed existed mainly in an aestheticized state in bourgeois society.[4] In the context of western bourgeois society, he views aestheticism as a more or less comfortable state of affairs in which art plays a benign role when it is dissociated from practical life. Bürger finds missing from the autonomous institution of art as it exists in bourgeois society

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avant-garde. See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1966), pp. 5-15. See also Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Gerald Fitz (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[2] Henri de Saint-Simon, *Opinions Litteraries, Philosophiques et Industrielles* (Paris, 1825). Oeuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin (1865-1879), vol. 39. Reprint, Aalen, 1964.

[3] Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-garde: France, 1830-1880," in Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery, eds, *The* Avant-Garde (New York: Macmillan, 1968) p. 12.

[4] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 49.

the social engagement required to produce radical social change. Art, when connected to life, he believes, can serve as a positive force against tyrannical political and economic developments and as an aid to actualizing freedom and justice. Hence he looks to the particular manifestations of *avant-garde* art as a means of reconnecting art to life. *Avant-garde* in this respect is not a matter of targeting a particular stylistic approach to art such as Cubism, Dada, or Abstract Expressionism. Rather, it addresses the societal role of art embraced by any number of stylistic differences.

These earlier discussions of the *avant-garde* often link aesthetic manifestations of the *avant-garde* to radical or progressive social thought. The social *avant-garde* recognizes the importance of connecting innovative discoveries in art to other important ideological and technological developments of the times. Yet, not all *avant-garde* developments involve both of these elements. For instance, it is possible for a work to be *avant-garde* in its ideology, while using a conventional representational painting vocabulary. For example, in France Philippe-Auguste Jeneron, who was appointed director of the National Museums in 1848 by the revolutionary government, used academic representational pictorial language to express radical social ideas.[5] Official Socialist Realist art in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and artists in East European nations after World War II also employed traditional academic painting, combined with photography and cinematographically inspired imagery to realize radical social aims.[6] On the other hand, Neo-Impressionist painters such as Seurat and Signac in their paintings *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grand Jette (*1885) and *A Parisian Sunday* (1889) used *avant-garde* pointalist innovations in their paintings to portray scenes of bourgeois Parisian life. Further, not all aesthetic innovators among *avant-garde* artists of twentieth century shared an interest in social *avant-garde* activities. For example, Abstract Expressionist and Color Field painters remained largely apart from radical social and political developments taking place in mid twentieth century life, as they focused on examining the essence of painting itself more or less independently of social and political concerns.

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[5] Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-garde: France, 1980 to 1880," p. 12.

[6] Boris Groys, "The Other Gaze: Russian Unofficial Art's View of the Soviet World," in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 59.

My own view of the *avant-garde* in its historic role and in its contemporary applications, embraces both its aesthetics of innovation and its role as an agent of radical social change and does not limit this concept to a particular period of art history, or to a particular culture. I will argue that the *avant-garde* in both the aesthetic and social senses is a recurring phenomenon throughout the history of art, beginning at least in the nineteenth century. It recurs when social change calls for new art that challenges and seeks to replace existing art, or when artists become engaged in actions aimed at social change. Hence, the *avant-garde* neither begins nor ends with modernism, although modernism represents one of its important manifestations. My aim is to keep open the dialectic between changes represented in new art and the art of the past. This will include changes taking place in global or trans-cultural art resulting from the engagement of western and eastern art such as is taking place between China and the west.

These different manifestations of the aesthetic and social avant-garde found in western societies will serve as a background for identifying and assessing the emergence of avant-garde art in China. Allowing for cultural differences and temporal contexts, it appears that avant-garde efforts represent an important part of the history of Chinese art from the late nineteenth century to the present as it has in the west.

II

The history of Chinese art over the past 5000 years is varied and complex. Its complexity embraces both continuity and change. Continuity is evident in the practice of contemporary masters choosing to 'copy' the great works of past masters. However, imitation or copying art works was not practiced in any literal sense. Subtle variations in the application of brush strokes, color, and mood accounted for important differences. Perhaps this practice of drawing upon the work of prior artists is better thought of as transformation by bringing about subtle changes while retaining a deep respect for artistic tradition. This practice of modeling paintings after the masters continues through the twentieth century and into the present.

The question here is to what extent do the practices found in Chinese art, both past and present, suggest an element of the *avant-garde* resulting in artistic innovation or societal changes influenced by

art? There is little doubt that the practice of mining past traditions has had a central role in Chinese art. Indeed, such practices still exist in the major Chinese art academies of the twenty-first century. On the other hand, the words of Individualist artists of the seventeenth century, such as Ch'ing dynasty artists Tao Chi [Shih-t'ao] Kun-ts-an, Yun Shou 'ing, and Chu Ta [Pa-tashan-jen](1626 ca.-1705) suggest not all artists were content to copy the masters. A hint of the avant-garde spirit is perhaps expressed in the words of the artists Shih-t'ao and K'un-ts'an, respectively:

> I am always myself and must naturally be present in my work. The beards and eyebrows of the masters cannot grow on my face … I express my own lungs and bowels and show my own beard and eyebrows. If it happens that my work approaches that of some old painter it is he who comes close to me, not I who am imitating him. I have got it by nature and there is no one among the old masters whom I cannot follow and transform.[7] (Shih-t'ao)
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> The question is how to find peace in a world of suffering. You ask why I came hither. I cannot tell you the reason. I am living high in a tree and looking down. Here I can rest free from all troubles like a bird in its nest. People call me a dangerous man, but I answer 'you are like devils.'[8] (K'un-ts'an)

A cursory look at traditional Chinese landscapes, as well as fish, flower, bird and rock paintings of the seventeenth century Individualists offers evidence that innovative experimentation has existed in Chinese art well before the twentieth century. Experiments of these artists with brush work, color, expression of emotion, and abstraction, as well as shifting attitudes toward painting, point toward challenges to the artistic conventions of their traditional predecessors. Although aware of tradition, the Individualist artists chose to use tradition with originality and freedom, and to depart from it in their own development. Their rebellion against traditional painting of the master painters was mainly aesthetic, consisting of stylistic innovations. However, artists such as Shih-t'ao and Bada Shan Ren (Pa-ta-shan-jen) also signaled their societal discontent by adopting the lives of monks. In any event, their collective aesthetic and societal differences with respect to tradition were apparently sufficient to warrant their near exclusion from

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[7] Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), p. 115.

[8] Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), p. 115.

official imperial collections of the new dynasty.[9] From these examples it is not possible to attribute to earlier developments in Chinese art a fully developed case for the *avant-garde* prior to the end of the nineteenth century. However, there are at least symptoms of the spirit of *avant-garde* practices, both aesthetic and social, in these artists' work and lives as noted.

III

The participation of Chinese artists in *avant-garde* activities from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present is more complex. Important considerations affecting the development of *avant-garde* art include both developments within China's culture and history and the external influences of art in the west. In mainland China, Chan Buddhism "encourages an ironic sensibility and denies the privilege of any one doctrine in the search for enlightenment."[10] By emphasizing the process of *becoming* instead of *being*, Chan Buddhism approaches art from the perspective of constant change.[11] This attitude essentially frees the artist's mind from attachment to any particular tradition in art and creates a natural receptivity to innovation and change characteristic of the *avant-garde*.

Another factor internal to China was the dramatic changes taking place in the social and political climate. As the Imperial system of governance ended and a new republic was established in 1911 by Sun Yat-Sen and his followers, the call for reform in the social and political system was accompanied by the demand for a new art of the people. The spirit of the reformers with respect to literature is expressed in the words of Chen Duxin, newly appointed dean of the college of letters at Beijing University in 1917: "I am willing to brave the enmity of all the pedantic scholars of the country" in support of revolutionary principles aimed at destroying aristocratic literature in favor of a "plain

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[9] Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), pp. 115-125.

[10] Gao Minglu, "Conceptual Art with anti-conceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, catalogue, Queens Museum of New York, 1999, p. 127.

[11] Kenneth K. Inada, "The Buddhist Aesthetic Nature: A Challenge to Rationalism and Empiricism," *Asian Philosophy,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1994). See also Gao Jianping, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art: From Calligraphy to Painting* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Aesthetica Upsaliensia 7, 1996) p. 192.

and simple expressive literature of the people" based on realism.[12] A similar radical view on behalf of the visual arts is reflected in the words of Lin Fengmian, a progressive artist and arts educator in an address to The Great Beijing Art Meeting in 1927:

> Down with the tradition of copying!
> Down with the art of the aristocratic minority!
> Down with the antisocial art that is divorced from the masses!
> Up with the creative art that represents the times!
> Up with art that can be shared with all of the people!
> Up with the people's art that stands at the crossroads![13]

Lin Fengmian left the more conservative atmosphere of Beijing to found a new art academy at Hangzhou where he attempted to implement his ideas.

Arguably, the key external factor in the development of *avant-garde* art in China is the influence from the west. Although western pictorial means were known in China among professional commercial artists as early as the seventeenth century, these developments had little effect on other aspects of Chinese art. Western influences in art related to the *avant-garde* likely began with Chinese artists studying in Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century and with the importation of Japanese teachers into China to introduce western art techniques as interpreted through Japanese eyes to Chinese students and artists. The success of Japanese artists in adapting western art to Asian culture, attracted many Chinese painters to study in Japan as well as with Japanese teachers imported to teach art in China.

Of the numerous Chinese artists who benefitted from their studies in Japan, the brothers Gao Qifeng (1879-1951) and Gao Jianfu (1889-1933) were especially important to the creation of a Chinese *avant-garde* in the early twentieth century. The two brothers, together with Chen Shuren, are credited with bringing Japanese *nihonga* style, a blend of Japanese and western art, to Canton where they established the Lingnan School of Chinese painting. The result was a new style of Chinese painting known as New National Painting. In conjunction with his roles as artist and educator, Gao Jianfu's efforts included

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[12] Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p 33.

[13] *Meichu (1986:4) 64n.2.* cited in Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 44.

founding *Zhenxiang huabao* (The True Record), a magazine dedicated to promoting the new art and progressive social and political ideas.

Gao Jianfu's art was influential in the advancement of western art ideas among other Chinese artists of the period. His aim was to create a new pictorial language for Chinese art based on a synthesis of Chinese and western art. His approach involved attending to portrait painting, lighting and shade, and linear perspective found in western art and applying these elements to Chinese elements of brush strokes, composition, inking, coloring in the manner of the literati tradition of painting.[14] In an effort to make the art comprehensible to the masses he focused on contemporary themes from everyday life.

Gao Jianfu's approach looked beyond painting itself to the improvement of human nature and the betterment of society. He believed that traditional painting failed in all of its social functions except for serving the elite few scholars and the literate aristocracy.[15] His intent was to challenge and replace traditional art with art that would serve to reform the thought patterns of persons at every level of society. This meant replacing reflective, poetic scroll paintings and poems with art that embraces Chinese and western pictorial elements and is visually attractive, attention getting, and containing an element of shock. One of Gao Jianfu's paintings, *Flying in the Rain (1932*), portrays a "squadron of biplanes over a misty ink wash landscape with a pagoda in the background." The painting is executed on a Chinese scroll and is said to have been based on sketches made from an airplane, a daring perch for a painter in the early age of aviation in the late 1920s.[16]

Such a painting would have no doubt been anathema to the literati painters of the period.[17] Opponents of change did not consider the

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[14] Christina Chu, "The Lingnan School and Its Followers: Radical Innovations in Southern China," in Julia F. Anderson and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 1998), p. 68.

[15] In contrast to Gao Jianfu's revolutionary approach to art intent on making art accessible to the people, the aristocratic tradition limited access to famous paintings based on social standing. Viewing important works of art was considered a limited and intense social experience with rules and prescriptions on how to visualize or contemplate the art. See Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1997) pp. 112, 114-117.

[16] Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 52-55.

[17] Michael Sullivan, who admits his antipathy to the Lingnan art, believes that the school was based on a misconception of the nature and purpose of art in its lack of passion for form. He argues that the Lingnan movement was limited in its influence

new art based on western art ideas as art at all, in the sense of Chinese traditional art. Rather, western based art was initially considered in the category of "maps, charts, mechanical, and geometric drawings apart from art."[18]

Gao Jianfu was politically identified with Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary political movement. He served as a local commander with oversight of assassinations of Manchu officials and the manufacture of bombs supplied to the revolutionary forces. After leaving politics, he dedicated his efforts to promoting his ideas on the role of the arts in shaping human nature and society within the art schools of Shanghai and Canton where he served as a member of the Guomindang Industrial Art commission and head of the Provincial Art School. Later on he and his brother founded the Spring Awakening Art Academy that provided greater freedom for pursuing their own ideas for reform in Chinese art.

In what sense do the changes initiated by the Lingnan School warrant the label *avant-garde*? Not all of the changes in the art of China during this era would necessarily qualify as innovations of style when seen from the perspective of a western observer. For example, it could be argued that the introduction of western realism into Chinese painting draws upon an existing painting style and techniques previously developed in the west. Gao Jianfu's art is based on appropriation of existing techniques from western art and also of Chinese traditional art. Yet when viewed in the context of traditional Chinese art, the introduction of western art merged with elements of Chinese art constitutes a radical shift in understanding of what can be considered art. From another perspective, appropriation is a recognized practice in the creation of art in the west and also in traditional Chinese art. Picasso uses African tribal images in developing his art, and appropriation is an acknowledged practice in postmodern art of the late twentieth century. Chinese traditional artists also freely appropriate images from earlier master artists. Given the state of Chinese art at the beginning of the twentieth century, the New National Art (xin guohua) of the Lingnan school constitutes an important stage in the development of the Chinese aesthetic *avant-garde*. Moreover, the new art

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because of anti-Japanese feeling in China based on aggression toward China and its location in Guandong Province out of the main centers in Shanghai and Beijing. See Sullivan, pp. 57.

[18] Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p 32.

functions as a means of revolutionary social change aimed at changing the existing state of Manchu society. In this respect it also qualifies as an example of the social avant-garde as explained earlier.

In his book, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, Michael Sullivan describes the rift between the new art and traditional art in these words:

> The revolution in Chinese twentieth century art most profound in its implications for the future was not the introduction of new media and styles, or even the change from conventionalization to realism, but the questioning—and for many total abandonment—of the traditional Chinese belief that the purposes of art were to express the ideal of harmony between man and nature, to uphold tradition, and to give pleasure.[19]

IV

Apart from the Japanese's introduction of western art, the influence of the Paris *avant-garde* was also an important factor. Chinese artists who travelled to Paris, then the art capital of the world, to study and practice art were introduced to the latest developments in western art. The reception of Chinese artists in Paris was mixed. It seems that Chinese artists such as Yun Gee, who was in Paris 1927-1930 and 1936-1939, were initially welcomed with success, but ultimately experienced racial bias against Chinese that proved troubling.[20]

The type of western influences Chinese artists chose to bring back to China based on their experiences in Paris varied considerably. For example, Xu Beihong (1895-1953) favored a conservative eighteenth century romantic realism. He used it to create landscape and portrait

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[19] Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 26.

[20] Arthur A. Young, "Yun Gee: Interpreter of East to West," Anthony W. Lee, editor. *Yun Gee: Poetry, Writings, Art Memories* (Pasadena Museum of California Art in Association with University of Washington Press, 2003), pp. 154-158. Yun Gee, a young artist from South China who immigrated first to San Francisco and then to Paris from 1927 to 1930 found acceptance of his art in the French art world, but lamented a lack of racial tolerance of the French toward the Chinese and China's culture. See also Joyce Brodsky, *Experiences of Passage: The Paintings of Yun Gee and Li-Lan* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 26. Yun Gee did not return to China, but instead returned to the United States and subsequently lived in New York.

paintings in opposition to the modernist influences.[21] Maycing Kao, another Chinese artist working in Paris in the early part of the twentieth century, saw many options including "the individual styles of Manet, Monet, Cezanne, van Gogh, Derain and Vlaminck … as a repertoire from which to pick and choose."[22] Among the options were a range of then *avant-garde* styles—Post-impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Dada—all at work changing the course of western traditional art. Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), chose to follow the modernists Matisse and Modigliani in bringing *avant-garde* modernism to China.

Given the availability of such a range of experimental arts, one might assume that Paris would generate considerable influence toward the advancement of *avant-garde* art in China. Contrary to expectations, the Paris *avant-garde* had only limited success in China. This may have been a result of the resistance of Chinese artists, as well as the fact that the Paris *avant-garde* seemed less relevant to the changing social and political needs of Chinese society.

The first official National Art Exhibition of 1929 featuring western influenced *avant-garde* was held in Shanghai and opened to mixed reviews. Similarly, the 1935 NOVA exhibition of the China Independent Art Association with paintings by Chinese, Japanese, and other artists inspired by the Fauve and Surrealist movements was roundly criticized in the press, and ended NOVA. However, the editor of *Yifeng magazine* featured the exhibition and included a copy of André Breton's *Manifesto of 1924.*

Despite these and other scattered efforts to establish the *avant-garde, t*he challenges of absorbing the changes mandated by western realism, let alone the various western *avant-garde* movements that questioned traditional western realism, proved daunting. As Michael Sullivan has noted, without the support of scholarship, poetry, and the literary culture on which traditional Chinese art was based, individual Chinese artists found difficulty in establishing their own way to create art in the new styles. Opening up of the subjects of painting beyond

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[21] See *Michael Sullivan, Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 59, 71, 72. And Kuiyi Shen, "The Lure of the West," in Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China (New York: The Guggenheim Museum, 1998)* pp. 177, 178 .

[22] Maycing Kao, "The Beginning of Western-style Painting Movement in Relationship to Reforms of Education in early Twentieth-Century China," *New Asia Academic Bulletin 4 (1983):99.*

agreeable or symbolic themes grounded in social and aesthetic harmony created major problems for the Chinese artists. For example, nude models and the nude as subject were particularly uncomfortable for Chinese artists and art consumers. These factors and a general lack of support for western innovations in Chinese culture hindered the development of a vigorous *avant-garde*.[23] Add to these considerations the fact that some Chinese critics such as Chen Yifan believed that modern *avant-garde* art must be inspired by a revolutionary democratic nationalism capable of advancing the social and political aims of China.[24] It was not immediately clear to Chinese engaged in the challenges of forging a new China and dealing with the Japanese occupation how the Paris *avant-garde* suited the aims of the social revolution taking place in China.

V

Since the decision of the People's Republic of China to adopt Socialist Realism as the official art policy in 1949, *avant-garde* art faced a different set of issues.[25] The general philosophy for art during this era was set forth in Mao Zedong's 1949 "Yan'an Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art."[26] In this document, Mao provides the ideological guidance for artists and writers in China after 1949. He explicitly criticizes humanism with its emphasis on human value, human dignity, and human rights and eschewed any form of art for art's sake or art that is detached from or independent of politics.

With the founding of the People's Republic at the end of the long period of Japanese occupation (1937 to 1945), a third front of western influence entered the Chinese art scene, this time from Russia. Socialist Realism became the official art of the People's Republic. Traditional

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[23] Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 66.

[24] Che'en I-Fan, "The Modern Trend in Contemporary Chinese Art," *T'ien Hsia Monthly* (January 1937), p. 47. Also cited in *Michael Sullivan, Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 67.

[25] For an overview of art and politics during this period, see Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998).

[26] See Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies No. 39, 1980).

Chinese art was mainly viewed as elitist and out of touch with the needs of society. Art was essentially altered to fit the political and educational needs of the new regime or banned. From the beginning, carefully planned cultural policies were implemented thru the Ministry of Culture and the official Artist's Association. The aims of Mao's policies were "to organize artists for national reconstruction, to produce art of a high ideological level and artistic quality, to organize the study of art theory on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and the principles laid down by Mao in the Yan'an Talks."[27] The program called for methods of criticism, self-criticism, organizing exhibitions, publishing art journals, promotion of Chinese culture, and international art exchanges with like-minded artists across the world, aiding young artists, and encouraging the people to take an interest in art.

With the decision to adopt Socialist Realism as the politically correct means of visual expression, Chinese painting underwent significant alterations. "Changes in brushwork, theme, and style," were introduced to eradicate the essence of art as practiced by the traditional masters.[28] There was virtually no room for art influenced by the west apart from the Socialist Realism brought in from Russia and little or no room for any form of experimental art. Landscapes populated with images of power plants or industrial work sites, village scenes honoring agrarian workers often posed with party officials, and idealized portraits of the leaders, especially Mao Zedong, became the main stay of art of the People's Republic during this era. Subject matter and pictorial styles that did not fit the prevailing ideology were discouraged by official policy. This is not to say that the Social Realists artists made no important contributions to the history of Chinese art. On the contrary, the talented artists working in this mode produced some extraordinary works of great technical achievement and artistic interest for their insight into this period of Chinese culture.

The *avant-garde* in its usual sense was essentially banned during the era of the Cultural Revolution. Yet it is necessary to ask, to what extent, if any, did Chinese Socialist Realism produce its own *avant-garde* art? There are stylistic similarities in the Russian and Chinese applications of Socialist Realism; however the Chinese appropriation of Socialist Realism may have developed its own aesthetic innovations both in

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[27] Michael Sullivan, *Michael Sullivan, Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 129.

[28] Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China 1949-1979* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 2

form and content by drawing upon matters indigenous to Chinese culture as had taken place with previous western influences. The main problem with finding aesthetic *avant-garde* advancements was the lack of freedom for artists to experiment except within prescribed parameters.

Perhaps the most innovative social *avant-garde* development in this era was the role artists were expected to perform in realizing the socialist aims for society. Official policy insisted that artists establish meaningful connections with the people living in the villages and farms and encourage people of all levels of education and work to become involved in art. One of the central aims of Socialist Realist art in China was its program to integrate art into the lives of the people as a means of shaping emotional and ideological views. Typical images that appeared during this era featured idealized views of Chairman Mao shown with workers in agrarian villages as in the painting, "Chairman Mao Inspects Villages in Guangdong" (1971) by Chen Yanning.[29]

The most dramatic of these changes were initiated through the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This project brought artists and intellectuals in direct contact with the working people outside urban centers. While many artists endured hardship and suffering during this era, others such as Xu Bing found creative inspiration in his time with peasants and laborers that led to some of his most original contributions to avant-garde art. Xu Bing (1955-), who began as a printmaker, lived and worked with the village people during the Cultural Revolution. During this period, he experimented with block prints and developed a unique series of prints depicting village lives that became the "Five Series of Repetition" (1987).[30]

The deployment of Mao's philosophy through the period of the Cultural Revolution effectively discouraged any development of aesthetic *avant-garde* art outside of that framework until after 1976 when the Cultural Revolution ended with Mao's death. However, the conditions for art during this era were not static, and not all artists chose to interpret the mandate of Socialist Realism in the same way. Gradually, the official policy on art recognized that both traditional Chinese painting and the art practices of nations other than Russia, when

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[29] See Holland Cotter, "Artists Toe the Party Line," review of "Art and Revolution," exhibition, Asia Society, 2008-2009, *New York Times review*,

[30] Britta Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words: The Art of Xu Bing* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institute and University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 38.

adapted to the needs of society, might have value for serving the interests of the people.[31] Still, the political constraints on art essentially remained in place until 1979 when, in varying degrees, China once again became receptive to new developments in art outside the framework of officially sanctioned art.

VI

Again, the main emphasis for the post-1980s *avant-garde* came initially from the West. This time the major influences in Chinese *avant-garde* art came via the United States.[32] By the 1950s, New York had replaced Paris as the world art capital, with the result that much of the new influence for *avant-garde* developments during the second half of the twentieth century would come through New York. From Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol, artists continued to challenge traditional western approaches to art. This latest stage of western influence on the *avant-garde* in China has taken place with the easing of east-west tensions in the 1980s and the emerging of globalization in the art world. Globalization enabled Chinese artists to establish studios in the main western art capitals of Europe and America. The rise of contemporary Chinese artists to international prominence also brought Chinese art-

[31] See Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), 135-147 for a discussion of the changes in artistic policies during the era of Mao Zedong. In 1956 Zhou Enlai established research institutes where traditional artists were able to preserve their art. See Julia F. Andrews, "The Victory of Socialist Realism: Oil Painting and the New Guoha," in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998) p. 228 ff.

[32] Until the 1980s the artists working in the United States seem to have had little influence on Chinese artists. Before this time, the main direction of artistic influence with respect to China and the United States was from east to west. The reasons for the absence of American influence in Chinese art prior to the 1980s are complex. A Chinese Exclusion Act banning immigration of Chinese laborers into the United States was in effect from 1882 to 1942. After 1942, the political climate and the internal focus of Chinese culture were not receptive to American *avant-garde* influences. On the other hand, Chinese and other Asian influences were influential in American art and aesthetics. The philosopher-aesthetician John Dewey visited China for a year during 1919-1920 and participated in exchange of ideas with Chinese intellectuals. Later in 1934, American artist Marc Toby, whose work reflects the influence of Chinese brush painting, visited China. The importance of Asian influences including Chinese on American artists is documented in Alexandra Munroe's exhibition catalog, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* published on the occasion of the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, "The Third Mind…" January 30-April 19, 2009.

ists at home in greater contact with western influences. One consequence of the move toward globalization is that Chinese artists moved away from identity grounded in their regional histories and culture in search of transnational identity. As a result, national borders and societal reforms internal to the nation gave way to the search for transnational issues and a greater focus on the artist's own self-identity as a ground for the new art.[33]

In an attempt to define the avant-garde for the era of Chinese culture after 1979, Gao Minglu offers the following statement:

> The art of the Chinese avant-garde might be considered alien in the context of Chinese society. Its formal terms are foreign to traditional art, official art, and academic art. Its social and political ideas also are alien to the status quo, as avant-garde artists pushed traditional political and social structures along a more progressive course.[34]

Moving into the present, there is no common political or aesthetic orientation to be found among the *avant-garde* artists of this period, as more and more artists seek their inspiration from personal insights and explorations. At this point, the *avant-garde* has shifted in many directions and is undergoing constant changes. Here are a few of the highlights to round out our account and bring the matter up to the present.

Among the important moments for *avant-garde* art of this later period in China were the exhibitions of the Stars group. Their exhibitions begin in 1979 with an informal exhibition of 'protest' art against official art. The first Stars exhibition was held on the street outside the National Art Gallery in Beijing. The main focus of this exhibition was to mount a critical response to the Cultural Revolution and to the perceived continuation of oppressive conditions for artists following that era. Police intervention cancelled the exhibition after two days, resulting in a protest march. However, subsequent exhibitions of the Stars group took place with legal recognition in a Beijing Park and in the National Museum itself in 1980 in what was seen as a compromise with Chinese cultural officials. By the mid 1980s *avant-garde* experimental movements had spread across China to form a nationwide

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[33] Leng Lin, "Preface to It's Me" in Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000) pp. 106, 107.

[34] Gao Minglu, *Fragmented Memory*, edited with Julia Andrews (Wexner Center, Ohio State University, 1993), p. 4.

network of *avant-garde* artists, culminating the '85 Art New Wave movement.[35]

In part as a response to an anti-western movement known as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement, a series of *avant-garde* art events took place between 1985 and 1989 throughout twenty nine provinces of China. Exhibitions and discussion among artists were supported by magazines and newspapers such as *Fine Arts in China* (Beijing), *Artistic Currents* (Hubei), and *Painters* (Hunan). The culmination of these efforts took place in February 1989 with the exhibition *China/ Avant-garde* at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. Included were major artists Xu Bing, Wang Guangyi, Gu Wenda and others. This exhibition was intended as a major confrontation with official Chinese art as it directly attacked Communist ideology and official art politics. Not surprisingly, *China/Avant-garde* generated sizable consternation and was closed down periodically during its two week run by Chinese officials. A few months later, the incidents on June 4 at Tiananmen Square effectively closed down *avant-garde* operations for the next several years. Shortly afterward in 1990, major Chinese artists Wu Shanzuhan, Xu Bing, and Gu Wenda left for exile in the west and focused on developing their international careers with occasional presentations in China.

Cancelled exhibitions became important vehicles of *avant-garde* art of the 1990s in China. The term 'cancelled exhibition' refers to exhibitions that proceed through concept development, planning, design, installation, censorship, and ultimately cancellation. This means that the exhibition exists as a material reality, except that it never officially opens to the public because of last minute notifications of failure to comply with official permissions. Despite the fact that the exhibition does not open, it nevertheless takes on a different meaning. With cancelled exhibitions, the focus shifts from the exhibition space as a venue for viewing the art on display to a place of public speculation, resentment, and protest. Wu Hung's reconstruction and analysis of one such exhibition, *It's Me: An Aspect of Chinese Contemporary Art in the 90s,* an exhibition planned to open in Beijing November 1998, is useful in understanding this development.[36]

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[35] Wu Hung, *Transcience*: *Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum, University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 19.

[36] Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 2000). Wu Hung organized the exhibition *"It's Me:*

While moving toward increased tolerance of non-official art, the Chinese art policies as reflected in the actions of the National Association of Chinese Artists and the Ministry of Culture have oscillated between greater flexibility and periodic retrenchment. Nevertheless, in subsequent years China experienced a new wave of western art, mainly coming from the United States initially in such forms as the Political Pop art movement that in part translated into a focus on market oriented art.

Once more, these new developments have introduced into China art that fits neither traditional Chinese art nor the art of the Socialist Realism era. This situation is increasingly generating a series of cultural crises for contemporary Chinese artists. In the 1980s and subsequent years, the answer for a number of talented Chinese artists was exile to Europe or America. By the 1990s and continuing into the early years of the twenty-first century, Chinese artists have risen to the forefront of the international art market.

Prominent international contemporary Chinese artists including Gu Wenda, Wang Tiande, and Xu Bing, whose work is respected both in the west and China, drew significant aspects of their work from their reflections on the tradition of Chinese calligraphy while producing their avant-garde art. Artists such as Qin Feng, Feng Mengbo, Ma Bao Zhong, Liu Fenghua and others in very diverse styles pay homage to the highest achievements of Chinese art and culture, past and present, while also incorporating the inventions of twentieth century masters from the west.[37] The question has been raised, whether by such efforts artists are honoring or undermining a Chinese tradition, expanding on it or emptying it of significance.[38]

Cancelled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China," in 2000 at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, as a pedagogical means of analyzing the state of exhibiting contemporary Chinese avant- garde art. (Hung prefers the term experimental art). His catalogue provides analysis of the 1998 exhibition curated by Leng Li, pp. 106 ff, and documents a total of twelve cancelled exhibitions from the 1990s.

[37] See Curtis L. Carter, "Art Without Cultural Borders: Reflections on Qin Feng's Art," *Qin Feng* (Beiing: Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), pp. 82-84. Curtis L. Carter, "Ma Baozhong: Creating a Visual Theater of Power," *Touch: Ma Baozhong's New Works (Beijing: X in Beijing Art Gallery, 2008)* pp 13-19. Curtis L. Carter, "Contemporary Ink Painting," (Beijing: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Fairbank Center of Chinese Studies, Harvard University, 2009; Berlin: Raab Galerie, National Dr. Sun Yet-Sen Memorial Hall Taiwan, 2009), pp. 20-23.

[38] See Holland Cotter, "Pictorial Delights Beyond Words," *New York Times,* Sep-

With respect to the *avant-garde*, success in the international art market operates in conflicting ways. The art market fosters a form of planned obsolescence in its demand for new art, not unlike the industrial and technology market where innovation and change perpetually drive the demand to create new products. In doing so, the market offers a temptation to artists to produce works that satisfy a global market demand irrespective of their artistic significance. This matter is of increasing concern as young artists barely out of art school are drawn into the booming market for contemporary Chinese art before they have time to reflect on and develop their ideas and talents.[39]

At this moment, Chinese artists who previously chose exile are being welcomed back into the Chinese arts community. For example, Xu Bing, one of the most famous, returned in 2008 as vice-director at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. This turn signals a new consciousness among artists of the importance of Chinese culture past and present and its implications for creative future artistic developments in China. At the root of the current interest in Chinese art are certain key factors: increased artistic freedom to experiment, a growing nationalism that celebrates what is distinctively Chinese and is also fitting for strategic placement in a global context, and increased recognition on behalf of Chinese officials of the importance of art for the Chinese economy. The latter has led to growing infrastructural support for the burgeoning art developments in China.

Hence Chinese artists of the present generation must struggle with the question of how their work relates to tradition and to the circumstances of contemporary life, both internally in China and in the global world. As they experiment with and modify Chinese art and culture, a central problem for the *avant-garde* artists of today is to discover how to build upon their Chinese cultural heritage and also connect to the new developments of contemporary life in China and throughout the world.

For some, the influence of Chan Buddhism continues to be an important theoretical source for the *avant-garde*. Artist Huang Yong

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tember 8, 2006, review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, "Brush and Ink: The Chinese Art of Writing," September 2, 2006-January 21, 2007.

[39] Commercial pressure on young artists has reached even the highest levels of training for young Chinese artists including the state run Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts where buyers and collectors now visit the school in search of the next art star and students are given commercial exhibitions at galleries even before completing their studies. .See David Barboza, "Schooling the Artists' Republic of China," *New York Times,* March 30, 2008.

Ping cites Chan Buddhism as the basis for his theory of the *avant-garde* when he advocates destruction "of doctrine, institutional authority, master texts, ideology, authorship, subjectivity."[40] He notes that, when combined with Dada from the west, Chan Buddhism becomes "a potent weapon in the Chinese avant-garde's assault on business as usual," by aiding in upsetting aesthetic, social, and political conventions. Chan Buddhism's concept of emptiness also informs the work of artists such as Xu Bing whose unreadable *Book from the Sky* (1987) is said to evoke receptivity in the viewer to a richer realm of truth or enlightenment.[41] *Book From the Sky* is a work of monumental aesthetic and social import, which consists of four books printed using more than a thousand unreadable characters familiar in their likeness to traditional Chinese characters, all invented by the artist. This work aims to force the viewers to disengage from their relationship to the symbols of language and reflect in new ways on the role of language in reference to cultural identity.

In the non-official popular culture of the 1990s, language entered into *avant-garde* practices in the form of humorous or ironic sayings screened onto T shirts or cultural shirts (wen hua shan). The cultural T shirts movement was initiated by a young Beijing artist-designer, Kong Yonqian, in 1991. Within a short period of time his anarchic cultural T shirts appeared on the streets of Beijing and across the nation as a form of social protest against perceived failures of reform efforts. The aim of this movement was to use "nonofficial colloquial language to communicate sentiments that many people shared but were unable to give voice to in public."[42] This effort differed from other *avant-garde* projects as it brought the *avant-garde* into the marketplace and engaged a mass audience instead of a limited segment of the arts and intellectual communities. Through its aphoristic sayings the cultural T shirt movement engaged in the emerging debate over con-

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[40] Gao Minglu, "What is the Chinese Avant-garde?" Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, *Fragmented Memories: The Chinese Avant-garde in Exile* (Wexner Cener for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1993).

[41] Huang Yong Ping, "Xiamen Dada: A sort of Postmodernism," *Zhongguo Meishu* Bao (China Art Press), No. 46 (1986). Cited in Gao Minglu, "Conceptual Art with Anti-conceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980,* exhibition catalog, Queens Museum of Art, New York, April 28-August 29, 1999 et al., p. 127.

[42] Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 145, 149.

temporary encounters between western and Chinese culture and the question of reinterpretation of elements of Chinese culture.[43]

VII

Thus in some form, the question on the mind of every serious Chinese contemporary artist is, how to remain connected to Chinese roots and also create art that is meaningful and appreciated in a changing world where east and west are drawn ever closer. Addressing these changes is not a question of Chinese art versus western art. Rather, the practice of art in a global context has become a matter of enabling individual artists to create, using ideas and visual forms irrespective of their particular cultural origin. This means that the artists have available an evolving universal vocabulary of artistic means, including their Chinese heritage and avant-garde innovations, contributed over time from the practices of artists working in many cultures east and west across the world.[44]

What are the implications of these developments for the current state of avant-garde in China today? The art systems in China today operate on a variety of levels. Government supported enterprises include painting academies at the national and provincial levels, military art centers, the China Artists' Association, art institutes such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and other academies and departments of art in the Normal Universities throughout China. Amateur artists who practice art as a means of personal cultural development continue a longstanding tradition in China. Free professional artists, who work independently and rely on their own resources, represent an increasingly larger population among Chinese artists today.[45]

Avant-garde art thus operates in reference to the other forms of art operating in China today. These forms include: "(1) a highly politi-

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[43] Kong Yongqian's cultural T Shirt effort resulted in his detainment, release without being charged, and official confiscation and destruction of a portion of his Cultural T Shirts. Reportedly, officials viewed his shirts as "the most serious political incident that had occurred in the capital since June 4, 1989." See Barmé, p. 145.

[44] See Curtis L. Carter, "Conceptual Art: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?" *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Vol 8, 2004: 15-28.

[45] Wang Chunchen, "Current State of Chinese Art," in this volume.

cized official art directly under sponsorship of the party, (2) an academic art that struggles to separate itself from political propaganda by emphasizing technical training and higher aesthetic standards, (3) a popular urban visual culture that … absorbs fashionable images from [external sources], and an international commercial market."[46]

Among these artist groups working in China today there are many different levels and variations, both ideological and aesthetic. The free professional artists are the most likely, though not the only, source of *avant-garde* art in China today. The outcome of our study does not in any sense suggest a return to Chinese traditional art without regard to the *avant-garde* and other newer cultural developments. Rather, the situation invites artists, especially those among the free professional artists aspiring to international connections, to continue to develop new ideas for art incorporating their cultural histories and those of others.[47] There are sign that artists are eager to find new directions for Chinese art. With the tools of western art and traditional art in hand, they are ready to think of Chinese art in new ways. Their aim is to go beyond the changes based on western art toward a new contemporary art surpassing the limitations of the western dominated forces of globalization of the 1990s to a new era that recognizes Asian art as an equal partner alongside western art. And yet such undertakings cannot be embarked upon without risk. The effort to create bridges between tradition and innovation are often met with skepticism, as the Daoist Zhauangzi (c. 369-286) understood. Similarly, the distribution of benefits both cultural and natural can lead to clashes of culture leading to violence and dysfunctional societal and cultural outcomes. Even the forces of nature depicted so beautifully in a painting can be merciless in their unequal disbursements of beauty and human suffering, as recurring earthquakes and floods attest.

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[46] Wu Hung, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1991) p. 12.

[47] See for example, the exhibition, *Bags of Stone Grinding Against Each Other*, National Art Museum, Beijing, September, 2008 and Museum of Far East Antiquities, Stockholm, November, 2008. Stones rubbing together is intended as a metaphor of two civilizations, east and west, coming together to forge a new art for the future.

VIII

Before concluding, it is useful to address briefly the similarities found in examining the *avant-garde* in Chinese art with reference to its place in western art. The comparison offered here suggests more similarities than one might expect to find. For example, the emergence of *avant-garde* art in the west required a break in tradition from classical ideals of art accumulated from antiquity through the Renaissance, just as the introduction of *the avant-garde* into China resulted in challenges to traditional Chinese art. In western art, the subject matter for paintings was mainly dominated by themes from the Bible and scenes portraying Christian saints, or characters of Greek mythology. Allowing for differences in understanding the meaning of beauty and the approaches to representation of nature, whether as skillful imitation or as idealized nature, these ideas and subject matter formed the main core of western art until the end of the nineteenth century. It was only after the French revolution that artists were free to choose their subjects based on imagination and a broader range of interests. The shock effect of innovations in painting such as giving priority to color over correct drawing introduced by Eugène Delacroix (1799-1863) and the new realism based on direct observation of nature introduced by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Edouard Manet (1832-1883) were only the beginnings of challenges to be mounted in the west against established conventions of previous approaches to painting.[48]

In China, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the traditional arts including landscape painting and calligraphy functioned similarly to the classically based paintings in the west, that is, as the opposition to emerging *avant-garde* art. A look at the responses of Europeans to the new developments in western art suggests that the shock and resistance was no less evident among traditionalists in the west than were the responses of the Chinese traditionalists to the introduction of *avant-garde* ideas and practices into Chinese art. Perhaps the main difference is that the primary impetus for the *avant-garde* in China was a result of external influences instead of being indigenous to Chinese culture.

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[48] E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, MCML), Ch. 24, 25.

IX

In conclusion, this overview of *avant-garde* developments suggests that the *avant-garde* in China has maintained a presence in a variety of societal conditions, both democratic and otherwise, and remains vital to a healthy climate for the arts and for society in general. Its presence has contributed to expanded artistic freedom and increased societal tolerance. Additionally, the persistence of the *avant-garde*, often in the face of official resistance and the reticence of traditionalists, assures a healthy ongoing tension between the traditional culture and the infusion of new ideas. At the same time, the social *avant-garde* assures challenges to complacency and stagnation necessary to maintain a vital, living society.

Based on my own recent first hand observations of the status of art in China today, it appears that art is experiencing unprecedented energy and growth. The expansion of art zones such as 798, Songzhuang Village, and many others throughout Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities, exceeds anything that has taken place with respect to art elsewhere in the world. Within these developments, the *avant-garde* continues to thrive. Nowhere is the vitality of traditional Chinese culture fused with *avant-garde* creativity more vibrantly expressed than in the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics where 16,000 performers demonstrated the cultural genius of China past and present for all the world to see. Given the energy and talent evident in these new developments in the art of China, we should expect to see the direction of influence in the arts increasingly turning from west to east. This development may well reverse the historic pattern where the major impetus for new ideas in the arts previously relied on the influence of innovations contributed by the artists of the west. While the influences of the east on art in the west have not been absent, as the 2009 Guggenheim exhibition, *The Third Mind* demonstrates,[49] perhaps the future generations of the *avant-garde* will rely even more on the artists of the east than has been the case in recent times.

As the twenty-first century unfolds, the world centers for new developments in art are increasingly plural rather than focused in a

[49] Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*. *The Third Mind* shows the importance of Asian art, literature, and philosophy for American art from early modern to contemporary art, including artists from James McNeill Whistler to Marc Tobey, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, and John Cage.

single geographic space such as Paris or New York. The new centers for innovation and change are as likely to be in Asia, Africa, or Latin America as in Europe or the United States. Hence it will not come as a surprise that the future centers of artistic innovation are increasingly to be found in Beijing or Mumbai. The global art world of today welcomes the best of creative efforts from everywhere in the world. At the moment, art in China is at the forefront.

POST-COLONIAL AND CONTEMPORARY ART TRENDS IN TAIWAN

Pan Fan

Speaking of the modernization of Taiwanese art, regardless of the complicated world of politics and the real development or self-discipline of art, we have no choice but to view the incident of the 1895 Japanese invasion of Taiwan as a fundamental historic turning point. By clearly distinguishing and recognizing this starting point, we can gain a profound understanding of the diversity implicated and contained in Taiwanese art. In its modern development, Taiwanese art is faced with the setback caused by the conflict of self-identification and cultural contradictions, thus forcing Taiwanese art to feel the need unceasingly to search for self-orientation and self-reconstruction.

1. *Colonization and Post-Colonization*

Taiwanese art is not just theoretically post-colonial. In fact, Taiwanese art faced the fate of colonization as its real fate and sought to reflect the significance and value of local traditions, customs, and art. When the first Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1894, Taiwan was ceded to Japan and imperial colonialists applied armed repression from 1895 up to Chiang Wei-shui's democratic movement in the 1920s. Similarly, imperial colonialists used methods of armed repression in cultural reformation movements. Culturally, Taiwanese art must face both the gap between two different generations and the predicament of re-self-orientation. Culture had to find its identity while under the dominion of different nations.

The first thing to focus on is this: before Japan ruled Taiwan, during the period of the governance of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Taiwan was not just a geographical border but was an island on the southeastern coast, far away from the capital, Beijing. At the same time, Taiwan was also a cultural border. Its fine arts were deeply influenced by the southeastern coast of mainland China due to the fact that over 95% of

the residents of Taiwan emigrated from the Fujian and Guangdong coast. Due to this cultural identification, the artistic style of that time was called 'Fukien province customs'. Nevertheless, when world culture changed from the era of land power to that of sea power, because of its location Taiwan was viewed as one of the main routes for global navigation, the center that linked northeast and southeast Asia. However, this also marked Taiwan as the main place for imperialists to invade. The cultural and geographical borders of former days were now a gateway for imperialism to expand its domain. In the early days when China was still in its days of power and prosperity, both the Netherlands and Spain had control over navigation and trade.

In the 17th century, the two nations settled on the Penghu Islands and in Damshui in northeast Taiwan. The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) sent in troops to regain control of Penghu. After the collapse of the Ming dynasty, the Southern Ming dynasty of Zheng Cheng-gong retreated to Taiwan in order to resist the Qing dynasty and banished the western colonizers. At this time, the Hans first established a regime in Taiwan. However, for the aborigines who had been settled there for thousands of years, the Netherlands, Spain, the Southern Ming dynasty, the late Qing dynasty, or Japan were all colonial regimes. This complex history constructed the basic features of Taiwanese art today. In other words, the diversity of our cultural identifications and the frequent replacement of regimes forced this immigrant island called Taiwan, consisting mainly of Han people, to reflect constantly on the significance and meaning of customs and culture. Nevertheless, it was due to the degree of cultural difference between the Japanese and the Taiwanese that the Taiwanese people tasted the bitter pain of being colonized for the first time in the period of the Japanese colonization.

As a result of World War II, after 50 years of rule by the Japanese colonial government Taiwan returned to the hands of China in 1945 and was taken over by the Kuomintang (KMT, also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party) government. To insure the continuity of its regime and its culture, Taiwan should have been connected with and related to mainland China. However, in 1949 when the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek failed in the Chinese Civil War against the communists in mainland China, they retreated to Taiwan, where hundreds of military men crowded into the place inhabited mainly by immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong. Cultures from

various Central Plains were compressed into this 36,000 square kilometer (22,360 square mile) island. Following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the Pacific region became the area where two powerful nations, Soviet Russia and America, opposed and confronted each other. Chiang Kai-shek had the chance to relax for a while. However, the leader of western countries was still America, and the culture and military and political affairs of the western countries deeply permeated Taiwan. Once again, Taiwan experienced cultural colonization, although without having a colonial regime. The cold war period between the east and west had a deep influence on Taiwan, especially in its initial stages. Both the cultural and educational policies of the government reflected the continuation of the war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China (CPC) and resulted in the isolation of Taiwanese culture today and the contradictions hidden beneath its culture.

In the history of the cultural development of many Asian countries, colonization is a fact. During cultural colonization, the colonizer's culture unconsciously permeates the cultural system of the colonized through strong material control and culture-based reformation. Therefore, the values of the colonizers were naturally viewed by the people living in the colonies as the only value standard and were even used to replace the values of the traditional culture. As a result, we need to keep in mind that Taiwan is a place that accepted or absorbed other cultures. Because Taiwan was constantly faced with various challenges in different eras, confrontation and uneasiness often emerged within this piece of land. Moreover, Taiwan identifies with western culture fairly easily, and yet at the same time it also readily reflects its mother culture and the Han culture. A special cultural dialogue is built in between them and a balance in the development of culture is gained thereby.

2. *Two Approaches of Art*

The new art movement developed during the Japanese colonial period was deeply influenced by Japan. "Regarding the colonies under the Taiwanese political condition at that time, it was perhaps inevitable … that the Taiwan art of that period was merely a subculture of Japanese art. So-called distinguishing features of Taiwan only referred to the

discovery of regional subjects".[1] Nevertheless, there is no hiding the fact that the foundation of Taiwan's modern art was established by the views of the Japanese. It was based on imperialism.

After World War II, an extremely tragic incident for the development of the culture and art of Taiwan occurred and was responsible for the focus of the cultural and artistic development of the future years. On February 28th, 1947, before the National Government of the Republic of China retreated to Taiwan, the 228 Incident, also known as the 228 Massacre, broke out. Many outstanding Taiwanese talents who were trained during the Japanese colonial period were massacred during it, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This incident caused those who grew up in Taiwan before the National Government retreated to Taiwan to become fully attentive to politics and its reflection in culture. The woodcut print artist who recorded this incident and echoed the philosophy and living concept of Lu Xin (1881-1936)—considered by many to be the founder of modern Chinese literature and lionized by the Communist regime after 1949—was Huang Jung-tsan (1918-1947).[2] He came to Taiwan in 1945 and served as lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts of the National Taiwan Normal University. Huang's *Terrifying Inspection—Taiwan 228* is the only work of art that shows the tragic case of that time. Unfortunately, he was executed in the White Terror of the National Government in 1947. The development of art in Taiwan has been and still is lacking a breeding ground for leftists. Therefore, it is difficult to create art pieces for the common people.

Due to the disruptions of its culture in 1895, 1945, and 1949 and to various political and cultural taboos, Taiwanese art developed along two roads, just like romanticism in Germany. One road is advanced romanticism, creating new myths. The other is retrospective romanticism, which tried to recreate a traditional interpretation of culture as it was before Chaing Kai-shek promoted the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement at the start of the Cultural Revolution on the mainland to insure that the Four Olds of Mao (rules, customs, ideas, and habits) were not destroyed..[3] After the Korean War in the 1950s,

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[1] Pan Fan, *Acceptance of Taiwan Art Culture during the Colonial Period*, Oomori Atsushi, Okabayashi Hiroshi, Nakama Yuko Art: Where does it come from and where is it heading? (Kyoto, Hoyoshobo, 2009) p. 98.

[2] http://taiwanpedia.culture.tw/web/content?ID=9729, read on 9 April 2010.

[3] H.von Einem, *Deutsche Malerei des Klassizismus und der Romantik,* München, H. Becki, 1978, p. 70.

Liu Gui-song and Chuang Chu originated the Fifth Moon Group and East Asian Group. At that time, the National Government had just retreated to Taiwan and painters who were active In the Japanese colonial period from 1895 to 1945 were constrained. Yet the western art trend brought by Japanese colonizers before the war was imposed by martial law. Young painters' hopes to find a new trend and to be able to express their opinions at that time were based on the view that rejected the concept of traditional art promoted by Liu Kuo-sung (b. 1932, avid student of western painting). Traditional Chinese calligraphy advocated Center Pen—a technique that writes characters with the point of the pen to express a vivid line—on which all art expression theories are based.

However, the art movements that the young generation of painters led ultimately developed along the traditional road of 'holding onto philosophy from the east and learning foreign materials from the west' that still had the perspective of traditional art as its core concept. The first exhibition of the Fifth Moon Group was on May 10th, 1957. Later, Liu Kuo-sung recalled and pointed out: "At the beginning, the main research subject was modern Western painting. Therefore, the first annual exhibition mainly focused on Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism. [Not] until the second exhibition did we enter the world of abstract painting."[4] The first annual East Asian Group exhibition began on November 8th, 1957. On the eve of the exhibition, United Daily News published a piece of news: "The biggest feature of this modern art exhibition that brings Eastern and Western culture together is anti-academic, anti-science and its artists create a new era trend by themselves."[5] Evidently, this powerful mainstream emerged as a rejection of academicism and the official exhibition system and sought to free itself of the current conditions through western thoughts.

Nevertheless, from studying the political and cultural environment of that period we can see that Taiwan and its literature and art were part of the 'anti-communism and anti-Russia' battle. The government's literature and art movement did not conform to realistic trends. The channel Japan had used for introducing western thoughts

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[4] Hsiao Chong-ray, *Fifth Moon Group and East Asian Group: Development of Post-War Chinese Fine Arts Modernization Movements* (Taipei, Dong-Da Publishing Co., 1991)

[5] Page 6 of *United Daily News*, 8 November 1957 (Art Exhibition of the East and its Artists)

during the colonial period had broken off. In the period of the cold war, the United States established diplomatic relations with the Taiwanese government in order to compete with the communist bloc, and America became a powerful force dominating Asian culture. On December 3rd, 1954 Taiwan and America signed the military affairs-based Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty that included multi-purpose treaties involving political, economic and social affairs, even though Taiwan was subject to the conflict between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Communist Party of China. This treaty caused Taiwan, after freeing itself from Japanese colonial dominion, to once again become enveloped by another nation's strong culture, now American, and to return to the rule of the Hans. Therefore, the road that the Fifth Moon Group and East Asian Group wanted to find went from imitating the west to advancing towards a mode of artistic expression that consisted in combining eastern and western cultures.

Another development of art as it continued its route away from the colonial period was its making the sustainability of art and its customs a topic for reflection. In the distinctive development of Taiwanese art after the National Government had retreated from the mainland to Taiwan, painters from the colonial period lost their artistic freedom of speech and lapsed into a state of aphasia. Japanese painters of the colonial period, such as Lin Yu-shan, used ink, which is characteristically Chinese, as their artistic and creative source material. Japanese paintings rapidly ceased to be made and the social reputation, popularity, and cultural status built by oil painters during the colonial period also fell apart. In the field of painting, painters from mainland China before 1949 were the main symbols because among those who came to Taiwan, some were painters who had significant and representative work in China.

Judges of exhibitions of Taiwanese art took the point of view of the Japanese colonial government and advocated painters of the colonial period. They demanded that artists clearly see and have insight into local color and use this to discover subject matter that expresses Taiwanese customs and traditions. *Southern Scenery* created by Huang Tu-shui, a sculptor of the first generation during the Japanese colonial period, amply grasped the local aesthetic that imperialism expected. The harmonious and happy sight of Taiwan's distinctive plantain (banana) trees and the riverside scenery to which young shepherds return after herding showed the ideal customs and tradition that the

Japanese colonial empire wished to survey. This imperial contemplation became a standard for the appreciation of beauty in the colonial period.

However, when the National Government came to Taiwan after being defeated by the Communists on the mainland, Pu Ru and Huang Jun-bi were the only traditional painters among the major ink painters who came to Taiwan. As for oil painters, aside from pupils of Lin Feng-mian, Zhu De-chun and Xi De-jin, most of the major oil painters did not come. The pupils of Xu Bei-hung who came included Wu Chen-shuo and Shan Shu-tzu who had not yet established their own styles, so vivid styles were lacking. Achievements of painters during the colonial period were then intentionally blotted out, and those that the art world considered the remains of colonial culture were blotted out by the National Government. Therefore, after going through the 50 years (1895-1945) of Japanese colonization, Taiwan swiftly entered the foreign system of Han culture. Everything that happened in the past was either intentionally buried or became a taboo, like the February 28 (228) Incident. The tragedy of February 28 became the subject of suspicion and taboo. Painters did not dare to show or identify their own political views in their paintings.

The Kuomintang (KMT) government of Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo was closely linked to the fate of martial law from 1949 to 1987. When the KMT government lost the civil war on mainland China, it led more than a million troops and civilians in retreat to Taiwan and, ostensibly to defend against communist China but really to suppress freedom of speech, imposed martial law. Art began to explore and express the local memory of being under imprisonment. Therefore, the second road of Taiwanese art returned to reflection on past history and to objective commentary on value. In the 1980s, this process directed Taiwan to retrace local styles, whether in oil painting or Chinese ink painting. Painters in both oil and ink searched for past cultural memories under this resurgence of local spirit.

Lin Hsin-yueh commented on the relation between traditional Chinese culture and the new Taiwanese culture that had been colonized by the Japan:

> The Taiwanese art movement that arose after the war was trapped in the dramatic changes of the post-war political environment. Therefore, it was difficult for Taiwan to develop its own mainstream. A conservative ink painting style that came from the Central Plains became the

> official art under the protection and care of authorities, thus gaining the title of 'traditional Chinese painting' and popularizing the art. The type of painting system that rigidly adhered to formalities once caused art of mainland China to stagnate. Also, during the period of the Qing dynasty Taiwan reclaimed wastelands, and the painting system of this land infused itself into Taiwan through officials migrating to these other places. Although the scholars that came to Taiwan during the period of Ming-Qing rule settled in Taiwan, their hearts still belonged to the Central Plains. Whether it was frustration related to politics or being torn away from their native place, they expressed their emotions and feelings in poems and paintings. Their sentiments and the skills with which they expressed them all evolved around the conventional and traditional patterns of the Central Plains and were not focused on the real society of Taiwan."[6]

Traditional Chinese paintings focused on ideal landscapes to order to ignore the reality of Taiwanese society. The fundamental spirit of the development of Taiwanese art exists in the aesthetic perceptions of those in the real society of Taiwan, that is, the society as it was in the early Qing Dynasty when there was little exposure to the west. Before the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwanese painters attempted to find the real society in order to challenge the KMT government's suppression of their freedom of expression. When martial law was lifted, the subconscious resistance of the Taiwanese painters to the authoritarian regime that had been repressed under the regime disappeared. However, before 1987 Taiwanese art had often developed into political totems or mythology.

3. *The Lifting of Martial Law and Written History*

New mythology is the essence and spirit of Germany's romanticism and is also one of the transitional ways of re-representing the spirit of Taiwanese art after political martial law was lifted and democratic development began.

In the 1980s, Yang Mao-lin molded figures with bulging muscles, portraying the power of the masses rallying and crying out in protest on the streets of Taiwan before the end of martial law. He was responding to the attitude of Taiwanese society as it started to demand political and social reform. Moreover, we can also observe how, in the same

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[6] Lin Hsin-yueh's "Taiwan Art: 40 Years of History" appears on pp. 188-189 in *Taiwan Arts: A Collection of Reviews* (Taipei, Artist Publishing Co., 1999).

manner, Wu Tien-chang used portraits of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo to challenge the limits of art after the end of martial law. (Figures 33 and 34) Yang Mao-lin's works from this period responded to the part art played as an important witness to the development of a new era in Taiwan. He sought to create a vast world of epics with *Made in Taiwan, Yun Mountain Memorandum, Zeelandia Memorandum* (Figure 35) and *Tayouan Memorandum.* Other work that also concerns the land is Lin Hsin-yueh's *Back to the Root* (Figure 36) in which Lin uses the concept of salmon risking their lives to return to the place they laid their eggs to portray how participants in Taiwanese democratic movement would rather go to jail than be prohibited from returning to their homes. Rather than apply the overly modern representational method of modern artists, Lin used the images that touched and affected him on this piece of land.

"Taiwanese history left only desolation and trauma, which deeply seared Lin's appreciation of beauty. Without abundant historical consciousness, Lin Hsin-yueh's style would definitely not have been the way it is now. The degree of desolation and trauma is seen and proven in his paintings. By grasping the ups and downs of Taiwanese history, we will be able to relate to the images and thoughts that Lin created."[7] Struggling with memory lapses and divisions and sparing no effort to bring everything back, he hoped to reconnect the memory links that once existed and had now been split. Lin's works were deeply affected by the surrealism that was introduced into Taiwan in the 1960s, and in its realm he tried to lick his wounds and relieve his pain by establishing the identity of the Taiwanese scene, with its strong tones and various colors. Lin is a Taiwanese painter born before the war who has spared no effort to represent the appearance of Taiwan with images that visually touch and move him. He overruled the perception that Taiwan had to accept western postmodernism.

"A matter worth studying and exploring is whether Taiwan possessed the potential to develop the simplest post-modern society or whether Taiwan's post-martial-law experience can be referred to as

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[7] Chen Fang-ming's "Bleakness as a Form of Nostalgia—On the Artistic Style of Hsin-yueh Lin in Relation to Taiwanese Historical Consciousness" appears on p. 29 of *Back to the Root: A Retrospective of Hsin-yueh Lin* (Taichung, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2008).

post-modern or alternative post-modern."[8] Indeed, Taiwanese art experienced hundreds of years of development from 1895 to 2000. Due to the contradictions inherent in the pre-war and post-war political scenes, Taiwanese painting developed from an art of overall unconsciousness to one of assembling and rebirth that reflected the painters' experience of cultural choices and changes. Moreover, it can even be said that Taiwanese paintings experienced confirmation of self-existence after the loss of position caused by cultural impacts from outside and from the past. After advancing into the 21st century, Taiwanese painting had a much wider future and field of vision. The future is like an island culture, a place to abandon burdens, accept new trends and thoughts, and have the right attitude to deal with problems".[9]

After going through the 1990s, Taiwanese painters began to display indifference towards political affairs, progressively projecting their own views onto surrounding objects. Whether it is the art of gender identification dress up, installation, filming, comic figures, or works such as Hung Tung-lu's *Chun-li,* they have all diverged from serious cultural commentaries and returned to the transient feelings and visual pleasures of art. Taiwanese paintings adopted a great number of folk custom symbols—making funny but unusual random combinations and performing funny or arousing operations—in trying to create an image of Taiwanese customs and traditions. Modern paintings are complex and changeful and therefore have become a reflection of diversified and individual phenomena.

4. *Conclusion*

"In the midst of changing, Taiwanese art has had constant control over our lives and has had a rich form and style of expression. Having passion for the land, loneliness of the form, and the lonely soul of impact, Taiwanese art has already come to possess a drive and strong intention to break away from the entanglement of Western style and

[8] Pan An-yi's "Predicament of this Generation—Post-modern Symptoms and Strategies" was published in the *Place/Displace: International Symposium on Taiwanese Art* in Richmond Art Gallery of Canada on 29 April 2005.

[9] Charles Liu's "Place/Displace: Three Generations of Taiwanese Art" appears in *Hometown and Circulation: Third Generation Art Exhibition of Taiwan* (Taichung, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2004)

at the same time to face the immense cultural reflections and disordered international painting trends that accumulated over time, while incubating thematic culture."[10]

Yang Mao-lin recently represented *Peter Pan, Mazinger Z* and *Great Mazinger* in 3D metal sculptures (Figure 37) in order to randomly combine these spiritual figures from our daily lives and from our imagination and beliefs and then to place them onto a spiritual table to allow viewers to solve difficult problems and clear out doubts. Yang tried to create a new visual image without the cultural attributes and identification that its subjects originally had. Is the combination of traditional division and contradiction (where division is not itself contradiction) sufficient to console the hollow souls of those living in this world of grave reality? History no longer need be looked upon seriously; it is all convoluted and self-explained in the reception and pleasant sensation of momentary rises and falls. Taiwanese art experienced two roads of authentication—one created new myths and one reinterpreted the past—and artists today face the immense and grave history of the past in a relaxed manner. Art has become a visual fantasy of conscious release, advancing towards a diversified future filled with extraordinary and frequently changing events.

Notes on figures 34, 35, and 38.

Figure 34 Wu Tien-chang, *On the Rule of Chiang Kai-shek* (1990), oil on canvas.

A portrait of Chiang Kai-shek as a Chinese emperor, it is similar to a traditional Chinese funerary picture. He sits with dignity and is a symbol of Chinese patriarchy. When the emperor met his ministers in the Imperial Palace, he wore a robe embroidered with dragon patterns. On Chiang Kai-shek's robe, instead of the traditional dragon patterns, there is the story of his reign in Taiwan. The white background symbolizes the white terror that was the censorship under his rule.

[10] Pan Fan's "The Predicament and Prospect of Taiwan Art History" was published in *Place/Displace International Symposium on Taiwanese Art* in Richmond Art Gallery of Canada on 29 April 2005.

Figure 35 Wu Tien-chang, *On the Rule of Chiang Ching-kuo* (1990), oil on canvas.

As in funerary pictures, Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, is in the sitting posture of an emperor. His hands are on his knees, and he wears glasses. He is not serious, as his father is. The red background means that his rule was that of an agent of the Soviet Union. He had studied there in his early years and when he was president of Taiwan (1978 to 1988), he was taken into the Soviet Union's secret service to control the political and the military spheres. The story of his reign is portrayed on his robe.

Figure 38 Yang Mao-lin, *Great Mazinger* (2009) Metal sculpture.

Manga and anime characters were created in post World War II Japan. Yang Mao-lin exhibited sculptures of manga and comic book characters in *The Temple of Sublime Beauty—Made in Taiwan* in the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. Of the exhibit the artist said: "For many of us, these comic book heroes and heroines are companions while we were growing up and figures we worship and identify with" and asked: "Doesn't religion play the same role in many people's lives?"

EXPERIMENTAL PAINTING AND PAINTING THEORIES IN COLONIAL HONG KONG (1940-1980): REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL IDENTITY*

Eva Kit Wah Man

During the past fifty years the art of painting in Hong Kong has distinguished itself from other art forms, undergoing a metamorphosis in both concept and style. Conceptually, many Hong Kong painters have developed meaningful and systematic theories of painting and aesthetics which reflect a concern for cultural identity. In doing so, they have revealed the conflict that they as painters have encountered—a conflict between traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern Western aesthetics. Further, they have given expression to this in their paintings and experimental work. This article will illustrate the development of the conceptual and aesthetic transformation that took place in Hong Kong between 1940 and 1980 by examining the aesthetics and artistic experiments of several representative painters. In addition, this article will provide a critical discussion of this aesthetic development and ask whether art and cultural discussions in contemporary postcolonial discourse can be applied to the situation of Hong Kong.

Painting in Hong: 1940–1980

Scholars agree that, since the mid-nineteenth century, Hong Kong has experienced more cultural interchange than any other Chinese city. This is largely due to its colonial heritage and its geographical position as the southern outlet of China. In the pre-war period of the1940s, Hong Kong's painting scene was dominated by Western painting, and local art organizations were run by Westerners who outnumbered Chinese painters creating traditional Chinese art. This situation con-

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tinued until masses of Chinese painters immigrated to Hong Kong from Southern China during the Japanese invasion of China in World War II.[1] Yet it still took years before Chinese painters could bring in more Chinese influences to painting.

The dominance of Western artistic methods in Hong Kong continued for several years after World War II as Western painting—still life and realism in particular—flourished in galleries and museums.[2] The work of local painters was not of the highest quality at that time, because they had only minimal exposure to the great masterpieces as well as to intellectual discourse regarding 'foreign' art. The only painting classes offered to Hong Kong artists were taught by a few Chinese painters who had returned from Western art studies abroad.[3] As a result, Hong Kong artists still did not get as much recognition as Western painters in the years immediately after World War II.

Yet the neglect of Chinese artistry was soon to be remedied. Cultural modernization accompanied a period of intense industrialization in Hong Kong in the post-war era. Painters in the colony were introduced to a number of new Western modern art movements. In addition, the government of Hong Kong established new and innovative art colleges offering courses that reflected the rapidly changing art scene. In 1958, the Modern Literature and Art Association was established by a group of young, prominent local artists such as Lu Shoukun, Zhang Yi, Wen Lou, Wucius Wong, and Han Zhixun. The association organized prominent art exhibitions, such as the *Hong Kong International Salon of Paintings* in the early 1960s. The exhibit included modern abstract works by both local and foreign artists and, typical of the modern art movement in Hong Kong at the time, was a bold reaction against the traditional Western artistic practices of the 1940s and the 1950s in the colony. New developments like the *International Salon* were reinforced by the opening of Hong Kong City Hall in 1962, which soon became the main venue for art museums, exhibition galleries, art courses, and other events involving art.

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[1] Wucius Wong, "The Development of Hong Kong Art in the Recent Ten Years", *Ming Pao Monthly,*Hong Kong, (1/1976), p. 169.

[2] According to *Hong Kong Artists (vol.1),* the last art exhibition prior to World War II was *Exhibition of Western Paintings* held at a library in the Hong Kong University. *Cf.* Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Hong Kong Artists*, The Urban Council of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, volume 1, 1995, p. 13.

[3] Cf. Wong [1/1976], p. 170.

Still, in the early 1960s, Hong Kong's local artistic identity had not been fully established, and the artwork produced continued to reflect Western influence. Six years after its founding in 1964, the Modern Literature and Art Association dissolved, and some of its members founded the *In Tao* Painters Society. This group consisted of experimental artists attempting to integrate Chinese and Western styles by using a wide range of forms and materials. The members of *In Tao* juxtaposed traditional Chinese techniques and materials—calligraphy and silk, for example—and Western methods, such as print, spray-gun painting, and aesthetically progressive concepts including abstract and optical art of the West in three-dimensional works and sculpture, as well as painting. This served to introduce an entirely fresh, though not uncontroversial, set of creative media. The mid-1960s, then, marked the beginning of Hong Kong art. This coincided with a period of rapid economic growth and a move toward localization policies instituted by the British government in the colony, which was intended to nurture a Hong Kong identity. [4]

Hong Kong's artistic rejuvenation was just underway when political riots were sparked in 1967 by local leftists objecting to British rule. During this time of rapid change and political upheaval came the call for a return to Chinese traditional art and the creation of forms of art that Hong Kong could call its own. The trend was led by Lu Shoukun, who, since the mid-1950s had promoted a 'root-finding' process for local Chinese painters. He called on painters to first grasp the spirit of traditional painting and then turn to new developments once the proper tools were securely in hand. An accomplished painter himself, Lu combined Western styles—Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstractionism—with traditional Chinese painting in his experimental work. He later created the unique *Zen* style of painting. Lu's *Zen* painting integrated traditional Chinese ink painting with modern Abstractionism and served to convey Buddhist principles. Lu also launched one of Hong Kong's most notable movements in painting in the 1970s, which came to be known as the New Ink Movement. Members of this movement drew on traditional Chinese ink painting techniques and transformed them, yielding various new forms of expression. A number of Hong Kong's young artists were at the forefront of the movement, incorporating concepts from Western modern art, abstract expressionism, for the most part. The New Ink movement

[4] Ibid., p. 171.

in the colony marked the end of the dominance of Western academic oil painting and gave rise to Hong Kong Painting, which aimed at the founding of local artistic identity.

In the 1970s, more and more local artists devoted themselves to creating their own individual styles instead of conforming to Western artistic practice. In 1975, the Urban Council organized the first *Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennale* exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, a milestone in exhibiting modern paintings created by local artists. The government sponsored the exhibition, reflecting its support of local artists. The opening of the Hong Kong Arts Center in 1977 and the founding of the Fine Arts Department at Hong Kong University further promoted art education in the colony. Finally, in 1978, the exhibition *Hong Kong Artists: the Early Generation* was organized by the Hong Kong Museum of Art. This exhibition gave a retrospective of the artistic performance of local painters in earlier years, demonstrated Hong Kong's commitment to developing a local artistic identity, and encouraged a historical awareness of the talent within its border.

Communist Influences

In 1946, during the civil war in Mainland China between the Communist party and the National party, Hong Kong became a sanctuary for left-wing artists from the mainland. While their stay in the colony was temporary, these artists-in-exile founded the *Yen Kan* Painting Society. With the freedom and stability Hong Kong provided for them, the members of *Yen Kan* used art to promote their socialist political views explicitly. *Yen Kan*, which means 'the living of the proletariats', gave a strong socialist message to a colony in which the very rich and the very poor were living side by side; the contrasts were obvious and *Yen Kan*'s message clear. The society held exhibitions and produced publications that also expressed their philosophy of art and aesthetics. While the *Yen Kan* was in existence only four years before it was dissolved in 1950, it attempted to exert socialist influences on aesthetics in Hong Kong.

The founder of *Yen Kan*, Huang Xinbo also organized artists who had emigrated from the mainland regions of Kunming, Chunking, and Quilin to the British colony and arranged for them to be members of the society. *Yen Kan* also used a social club for Westerners as its

venue of activity, and in this capacity masked the Communist identities of its members. Soon the Society's art projects became very political. Its exhibitions displayed cartoon and woodcraft that symbolically demonstrated first the failure of the military, and second the shortcomings of the political and economic projects of the National Party in China.[5] In another bold move, the *Yen Kan* issued political statements that linked art with socialist theory. At the close of the civil war, the Communist Party was victorious, and the New China was founded by Mao Tse Dung. The Society then busied itself by producing war cartoons and huge portraits of Mao, the new and promising ruler. In the end, it sent nearly all of its members back to the mainland where they took up government positions related to art. The society's dissolution was complete by 1950, with high hopes pinned on the promises offered by the New China.

During *Yen Kan*'s four years in Hong Kong, its members actively promoted Mao's aesthetic ideology, as expressed in his speech, "The Yen On Art and Literary Discussion," delivered in 1942. A long article in a Hong Kong newspaper by the founder of the society, Huang Xinbo, in May 1949 revealed not only *Yen Kan*'s vision of art, but also its political agenda for Hong Kong.[6] In the first part of the article, Huang severely criticized the artistic community under the National Party in China, including particular local artists and groups that promoted Western paintings. Western painting, in *Yen Kan*'s view, was produced by and displayed for the rich only. Further, the paintings failed to express concern for the social conditions of the poor, and the artists themselves failed to denounce the political policies that perpetuated that poverty. The article identified by name Shanghai artists guilty of these charges, among them Liu Haixu and Tsu Baixiung, and accused their art of discriminating against the proletariat. Huang also claimed these artists either uncritically revered Western art and blindly followed modern Western painting or tried to please foreigners with traditional Chinese art—merely a leftover from a feudal society of days gone by.

Huang's declaration defined the New Art he and his colleagues promoted as neo-democratic art. New Art was to depict the lives of the

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[5] *Cf.* Tan Shuetsung, "Memory of the Revolutionary Art Body who Fought in the South—The Yan Ken Painting Society," *Meixu,* Renmin Meixu Press, Peking, 2, 1984, page unknown.

[6] Huang Xinbo, " Our Opinions in the Establishment of New Art," *Wen Wui Pao*, Hong Kong, May 20, 1949

masses who, according to Mao, were the soldiers, farmers and factory workers. Huang and the New Artists insisted that art should offer serious reflection on existing social conditions, addressing the themes of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. It should also take a realistic approach to solutions to these issues, based on that reflection. Huang's article also identified two missions for artists: first, use art as a tool for education; second, retrieve art from the hands of the privileged class. It insisted that art should be concerned with content but not with form, and that artists should depict what people were familiar with in everyday life. Furthermore, the Society believed that both the style and the content of painting should change with the times, as the lives and ideologies of people change over time. It should be noted that *Yen Kan*, in its public declaration, did not try to eliminate the art of the bourgeois because it realized that Hong Kong was quite different from mainland China. Hong Kong's masses were fueled by the corporate interests of capitalism. The Society believed that the bourgeois could advance along with the proletariat, but that members of the bourgeoisie needed to practice 'self-correction'. Obviously, *Yen Kan* ultimately failed to sway the political opinions of the majority of people in the British colony, who so eagerly followed Western colonial values. By 1950, at the end of their time in Hong Kong, *Yen Kan* had won few converts to their politico-artistic theory, although their social and artist influence was certainly notable.

Other artists groups and art organizations, however, took a favorable view of Western painting and were also active in the years of *Yen Kan*. Luis Chan, Lee Byng and Yee Bon, local painters who were famous at the time, produced Western-style paintings. Both Lee and Yee had studied in North America and returned to the colony to found their own studios. Though Chan had not traveled to the West, he became acquainted with both Lee and Yee. Apparently proving Huang's charges accurate, many of those who gathered in the studios of Chan, Lee, and Yee were indeed quite well to do. The three also offered lessons in Western painting to these same patrons. These artists were so devoted to Western classical painting that local artistic identity was not of particular concern to them. Thus, as will be discussed later, their influence took on a very different character from that of the *Yen Kan*.

The Local Spirit

There were a few painters whose art not only reflected the history of painting in Hong Kong in the 20th century but also represented the colony's spirit of experimentation. Luis Chan, a painter in Western classical painting, was one of the most prominent figures in this era. As noted above, Chan had never been to Europe or North America for formal artistic training, but instead was a self-trained artist. The style he came to call his own he developed through exchanging ideas with other local painters who had studied abroad. Making the most of his keen artistic sensibility, his fluency in English, and an indisputably charming personality, Chan created a large circle of friends. These strengths in combination raised him to a prominent position in Hong Kong's art community.

Luis Chan was also one of few local artists to cross the boundaries of social class and race and had established friendships with a number of European and American celebrities in the colony. This played in his favor among his local friends and followers as well, ranking him among the most popular of cultural leaders in Hong Kong. But Chan's acquisition of the public attention was gained over time. By organizing fund-raising balls to benefit the arts and by holding large art openings and parties, Chan created opportunities to exhibit his own work and later founded art societies of his own as well.

In 1934, at the age of 29, Chan was introduced to the Hong Kong Art Club by the wealthy Lady Shenton. Soon the club granted him executive member status and sponsored exhibition of Chan's work in watercolors the following year. This was Chan's first solo exhibit and one that placed him firmly in the center of Hong Kong's art circles.

While Chan continued to paint, he earned his living by running the family business before the war. His work in these years included Western academic paintings, primarily landscapes in watercolors and oil. After the war, Chan started to concentrate on oil painting. His strong relationship with the colonial governor, Granthram, helped to enhance his artistic influence.[7] Meanwhile, the civil war in China between the Communists and the National Party, as mentioned earlier, had fueled the passions of the *Yen Kan* Painting Society whose socialist orientation was very different from that of Chan. In the view

[7] See the introduction written by Governor Granthram to Luis Chan's, *How to Paint A Portrait*, Ming Sang Printing Co., Hong Kong, 1954, p. 1.

of *Yen Kan* members and other left-leaning artists groups in Hong Kong, Chan was as guilty as other local artists of representing the bourgeois in art and were regarded as art elite in the colony. Moreover, the British colonialists offered their enthusiastic support to Chan's promotion of Western painting, and formed an alliance which did not share *Yen Kan*'s nationalism, further fueling the antagonistic relationship between these opposing local visions.

While Chan was a skilled organizer, he was also, quite simply, a great painter. Early in his career, Chan was influenced by other young painters who had returned from abroad and who had promoted the Realist tradition of Western academic painting. Yet Chan did not really embrace Realism. In the foreword of his book, *Treatise on Art* (1953), he described art as "creative imagination" and saw beauty as "the expression of consciousness and emotion."[8] Although he adhered to the practical principles of painting in accordance with Western academic techniques, Chan had more regard for creativity than for imitation. Creativity, for Chan, was the spontaneous outgrowth of the artist's communication with nature or objects, an idea he borrowed from Constable whom he quoted in his writings. Chan expressed this same idea in a discussion in 1954 of portrait painting: "the most successful painting of a portrait, or for that matter, a figure subject, requires observant understanding and sympathy before full expression of the artist can be adequately made".[9]

Similarly, Chan expressed his sense of aesthetics in the preface to his book, *The Art of Drawing* (1955): "[the] ultimate technical accomplishment lies rather in artists' success in their adoption coupled with their imaginative and creative powers that may be developed by experience and endless experiments."[10] One's style, according to Chan, is the way to create one's artistic symbols. His quotation from Kandinsky summed up Chan's own sense of aesthetics: "To any question beginning with 'must', there is no 'must' in art, because art is always free ... from the point of view of an inner need, no limitation can be made. The artist may use any form which his expression demands; his inner impulse must find suitable form ... The general relationship with which these works of art through the centuries are always more strengthened does not lie in the 'external' but in the roots of mystical inner content."[11]

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[8] Luis Chan, *Treatise on Art,* Ming Sang Printing Co., Hong Kong, 1953, p. 1.
[9] Chan, 1954, p. 21.
[10] Luis Chan, *The Art of Drawing,* The Artland Co. Ltd., Hong Kong, 1955, p. I.
[11] Ibid., p. 62.

Chan's stress on free creativity and the mystical inner workings of artistic expression contrasted sharply with *Yen Kan*'s sense of art as political manifesto.

Although Chan had seldom practiced traditional Chinese painting, he had written a related book, *A Survey of Chinese Painting* (1954), in an attempt to examine the development of Eastern painting theories and to compare these to developments in the West. A representative example is his reading of the notion of 'spiritual resonance' (the first of the famous Six Ways in Chinese painting), based on Harold Speed's analysis. Spiritual resonance is a term used to describe the artistic process as a kind of musical movement.[12] Chan's interpretation, unfortunately, incorporated too many Western ideas of art and thus showed limited understanding of Chinese aesthetics, for he underestimated its metaphysical implications. Chan had also severely criticized imitative practices in the Chinese artistic tradition, which, to him, should serve as an introduction to painting only. Chan favored a stress on creativity and on Speed's notion of 'internal musical movement' instead.

By the mid-1950s, Hong Kong artists had begun to join in on the West's modern art movement. In 1955, Lu Shoukun founded the Hong Kong Artists Association, paving the way for the modern art movement in Hong Kong. Increasingly this movement would threaten Chan who came to be seen as the spokesman of an older generation immersed in the Western academic tradition. In order to defend his position, Chan actively engaged in debates on modern art in newspapers and in his own writings. Meanwhile, the New Ink Movement emerged as a major local art movement during this period. New Ink, a style launched by Lu Shoukun, sought to modernize traditional Chinese art. New Ink's challenges to the old order meant that the traditional Realist/Impressionist school of Western art, which Chan had represented so faithfully and so well, was facing severe challenges. Later, however, he started to experiment with modern art, following his desire to explore this new and provocative style.

Chan tried a wide range of styles. His motivation to explore modern art was heightened in 1962 after a rejection of his work by the curators of the exhibition *Hong Kong Art Today*, an event promoting the local Modern art movement. This led him to begin an exploration of a number of schools of modern painting including Cubism, Expressionism,

[12] Luis Chan, *A Survey of Chinese Painting*, Ming Sang Printing Co., Hong Kong, 1954, pp. 27-28.

Abstractionism, as well as a number of novel techniques, such as monotype printing, hard-edged color-field landscape, and spray-gun painting. In 1962, Chan explained his transition from Realism to Abstractionism:

> [This] has been a natural part of my self-learning process. I have been making art in both directions for a while, and I have no intention to give up either one of them … When I first attempted to make 'new style' art, I was exploring Cubism and Surrealism, but I found them too limiting in form. Then I decided to go fully abstract. Meanwhile I wanted to continue my realist style, but added a touch of Fauvist modification.[13]

Chan dabbled in many different forms at this time and came up with new questions about art:

> Why should we accept abstract art? That is because in our everyday experience, there is more than physical reality. We have thought, feeling and imagination and we cannot escape from abstract illusion. Realistic painting shows us physical reality, and abstract painting the mental and the emotional world. An abstract painter is someone who expresses emotion with his imagination as abstraction links with illusion and fantasy which exist in our daily life, only if we care to look for it.[14]

Through these explorations, Chan developed a theory of individual perception, of how artists view the world, and how their expressions are outlets for their deep emotions:

> When one needs to deal with the complexity of the world, they could either be optimistic or pessimistic. My abstract art is born in a pessimistic mood. Whenever I am depressed I turn to art, for it takes away my sadness and depression. In the world of my own creation, I am God, and I deliver all my sorrow to the universe I create. The abstract art I create is the voice from my heart which tries to make people understand emotion and life … Rhythm is the spirit of my abstract art, I create it in my own symbols and illusions, and successfully form a distinctive style.[15]

Based on these writings, it is clear that Chan's immersion in this new art form led him along a path in which he was discovering his inner self. Art is not simply representation of form, as he always realized, but also of the inner workings of the artist's own internal core.

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[13] Luis Chan, "From Realism to Abstractionism," publication information unknown, 1962.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

After years of experimentation, abstract art became Chan's main vehicle of expression, and Western aesthetics remained his main references. Unlike other local artists of his period, Chan insisted on absolute freedom in artistic expression, and this freed him from the burdens of both cultural heritage and nationalism. Both personally and in his work as an artist, Chan thrived in the colony, a bi-lingual and bi-cultural space where East and West merged. Questions of cultural identity and Chinese tradition very seldom affected him as all he asked for was a 'free soul'.

Chan revitalized his art through the playful and skillful use of the subconscious, producing distinctive surrealistic landscapes mixed with personal fantasy and illusion. His work included portraits and animal paintings in a unique and childlike style, revealing only his own humor (Figure 38). During the 1970s and 1980s, Chan once again emerged as an outstanding creative figure. Upon his death in 1995, he was described as: "one of the outstanding figures in the history of Hong Kong art, and an artist who, through boundless imagination and endless creative energy, was able to keep up with the rapid pace of development of Hong Kong".[16] Chan's adaptive and creative spirit, his association with the West, and his unique process of self-exploration parallel the development of modern art in Hong Kong.

The New Ink Movement

The New Ink Movement, led by Lu Shoukun, usurped Chan's eminence in the 1960s. At the time, Lu was a very influential figure in the local art community, as he promoted modernization of traditional Chinese painting and related it to a Hong Kong cultural identity. His views helped emerging Hong Kong artists address an existential crisis in the British colony—a crisis that became more serious when political tension finally grew into riots and street demonstrations in 1967 as Hong Kong's leftists protested against British colonial rule.[17]

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[16] Hong Kong Arts Centre, exhibition notes of "Retrospectives of Luis Chan, 1905-1995," Hong Kong, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1995.

[17] The radical political tensions that emerged between the British government and the Chinese leftists in the colony in the 60's were initiated by a group of factory workers on strike in San Po Kong which resulted in the 1967 riot. Thousands of workers joined in the riot which led to injuries. The riot was read as a local rebellion against the colonial government. After the riot, localization policy was promoted by the colonial

While Chan tended to interpret Chinese aesthetics according to the Western scheme, Lu absorbed Western ideas into the Chinese tradition. Lu, born in Canton, learned Chinese painting from his father. He also learned by copying ancient Chinese scrolls and pictures in his father's antique shop. Lu moved to Hong Kong in 1948 where he impressed the art community with his work and his teachings. Amazingly, he could reproduce at will every traditional style. However, his desire for individual expression caused him to become an experimentalist in what may be termed "Chinese art with a Western approach."[18] Lu was keen on ink painting, which he later mixed with his experimental ideas. Eventually, this led him to Zen painting, the style for which he was most famous in his later development.

Ink painting, developed during the Tang Dynasty in the eighth century, emphasized individual and spiritual expression. The original concept was to create an alternative to the strict outline and the splendid, colorful treatment that had been very popular in Tang.

The New Ink Movement, introduced in Hong Kong in the 1960s, revised traditional Chinese ink painting. Via New Ink techniques, ink painting went through revolutionary changes and was experimented with, using various Western modern art forms and styles. Lu's intent in beginning the New Ink movement was to fulfill local painters' need to establish an artistic identity for Hong Kong. In the view of this group of young artists, traditional Chinese painting was repetitive and failed to express feelings related to their living and times. At the same time, these painters were not satisfied with Western academic paintings, as they found them unimaginative. In Lu's view, new ink painting was a reform of the old Chinese tradition, as well as an embellishment to the Western academic tradition. He also took into account the social environment of the post-war era which encouraged, not only freedom of expression, but intense competition as well. So then, for Lu the spirit of New Ink painting offered a mental balance to people living in a colony which was overrun with material and technological advancements.

Lu regarded the tradition of ink painting as manifesting the spiritual principle of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which connected artistic content and form to personal, spiritual, and ethical cultivation. Lu

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government to build up a sense of belonging and local awareness among Hong Kong citizens.

[18] Cf. Lee Ying Ho, (ed.), *Modern Edition*, Hong Kong Modern Literature and Art Association, Hong Kong, No. 4, September 1963, p.14.

believed that the growing prosperity of Hong Kong, which by the 1960s had become an international and commercial city, provided some favorable conditions to the ink painting movement. First, according to Lu, the Hong Kong Chinese people could relate to ink painting; they felt closer to ink painting than to Western painting. Secondly, the international art community was more interested in a new genre of work that grew out of local cultural innovations than in imitations of Western schools. Finally, combining Chinese ink painting with Western materials and techniques produced intriguing artistic effects. Lu's views were reflected in the work of young artists who mixed ink with fluorescent colors or printing oil and utilized ink with concepts of Western design. He classified modern ideas combined with tradition as adaptation which should not be separated from the root or foundation, which, in traditional Chinese aesthetics, is the spiritual cultivation of the artist.[19] The root of painting, according to Lu, was based on ancient Confucian principles and teachings such as *Chung Yung (The Doctrines of the Means)* and *Da Xua (The Teachings)* both of which promote self-cultivation and self-discovery. Lu drew on these teachings to urge artists to return to the root—i.e. the inner self—and nourish it, to find the wisdom to incorporate new forms of painting. By returning to the root, painters could find their own style which would also reflect their own personality and ways of existence. According to old Confucian teachings, this return to one's root, or inner self, could also transcend temporal, spatial, and cultural differences.

Critics tended to read Taoist and Buddhist messages into Lu's paintings, especially in his Zen paintings, which reflected life attitudes of the two teachings via brush strokes in ink and abstract expressionism in style (Figure 39*)*. Lu explained his style in Taoist and Buddhist terms and said it reflected styles of living and the relationship between an individual and society. His vision offered solutions to artists struggling with a crisis of cultural identity in Hong Kong, who often found themselves feeling confused and ungrounded in their hybrid cultural situation. While Lu asked his students to follow traditional ways of learning and to copy traditional paintings, he regarded the practice of imitation as an introduction to the idea and skill of painting only. There was much to learn from the tradition, like the principles of

[19] Lu Shoukun, *Sui Mo Hua Jiang,* notes of Lu's lectures recorded by a group of his students and published by them, Hong Kong, 1972, pp. 31-33.

brush strokes and symbols. Once painting students mastered these, and only then, could they establish their own definitive style. In other words, Lu believed that artists should be able to break with tradition only after they have a good foundation and knowledge of that tradition.

Lu saw plenty of possibilities in merging the Chinese and Western styles of painting. He believed that by combining the artistic treatment and technology of the West with the spiritual temperament and ink brush strokes of the Chinese tradition one could create a whole new visual experience. The most important goal, he believed, was self-discovery. For, only through self-discovery could one form original ideas, and this process should always come before artistic form. Lu saw a need for a new form of expression in Hong Kong, which was becoming a place so foreign to the peasant society of China. To achieve innovation in art, as he always insisted, was to seek self-knowledge in one's tradition, a foundation which artists could build on later.

Lu's own experimental work paralleled his teaching. His attempts to modernize ink painting had been controversial, as conservative attitudes resisted his push for innovative experiments in painting. The following excerpt from a critique of his exhibition demonstrates conservative opposition to his work:

> (Lu's) new approach is almost entirely Western and it would, indeed, be hard to differentiate where Chinese painting ends and Western painting begins. However, his conception, technique and execution remain Chinese. . . . I do think, though, that it is dangerous for Mr. Lu to assimilate a phase of Western art which I consider undesirable—that is, vista or perspective painting. It has taken the Western artist hundreds of years up to our time to discover the disadvantage of making a hole in the canvas, thereby breaking the unity of the picture. [20]

Nevertheless, throughout the struggle for a new art form, Lu's was a strong voice in favor of nurturing a cultural identity in the Chinese artistic tradition.

From Traditionalism to Creative Freedom

Lu's influence through his work and his articles in various newspapers and magazines was significant to Hong Kong's art circle in the 1960s.

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[20] K.C. Wong, "Impressive Exhibition," *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, March 5, 1957.

While involved with the New Ink Movement, Lu was also curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art in the 1970s where he oversaw many important art exhibitions and events. After his sudden death in 1975 at the age of fifty-six, his efforts were carried on by his student, Wucius Wong.

Wong had studied Chinese painting under Lu in 1958 and became his close follower. With his provocative views on art and his call to return to Chinese tradition, Lu inspired Wong to a great extent. Wong studied art in the U.S. and was struck by what he saw of Western artistic culture. In 1966, a year after returning to Hong Kong, Wong chronicled this experience, describing life as a young artist in Hong Kong and outlining his struggles between the influences of East and West, modernism and traditionalism.[21] According to Wong's description, prior to the 1950s Western art was available in Hong Kong only as low-quality reproductions in art books. It was not until the 1960s when he studied in the U.S. that Wong had the chance to see genuine Western work. This experience also raised questions about cultural differences in artistic expression and an artist's relation to tradition. The West had not completely displaced Wong's Chinese roots, instead he was integrating the two influences, though not without struggle. He had also found that Westerners held two common attitudes toward Eastern art: one asked that what is essentially Eastern be preserved; the other insisted that Eastern artists should learn from the West. According to Wong, both revealed nothing but ignorance of Eastern art. Wong's reflection is reminiscent of Edward Said's notion of Orientalism and the problem of otherness in contemporary post-colonial discourse. As Wong said in 1966: "Some Westerners tend to look for their notion of the Eastern tradition in our work and make elaborate significance out of it, they disregard our creativity and our relations to the contemporary world. The others only read our work from their own aesthetics, values and modes of perception which finally repel them from really entering into our world of painting".[22]

Wong regarded the Eastern identity of young Hong Kong artists as the language they learned as they grew up. Chinese ways of living, thinking, and visual habits are all related to the Chinese tradition. This identity becomes 'the other' in a foreign context and can result in an

[21] Wucius Wong, "Return to the East and Get Set … ", newspaper article, publication information unknown, Hong Kong, 1966.

[22] Ibid.

impetus for artistic experimentation. Wong himself had attempted to give up the traditional lines in Chinese painting and painted landscapes in oil and the human figure in ink. But no matter how hard he tried to combine the East and the West, the former was still his base and structure. Soon he decided to return, both to his homeland in Hong Kong and to his Chinese painting tradition in order to have, in his own words "a greater freedom in creativity".[23]

Wong's idea of return is similar to Lu's notion of return, except Wong elaborated more explicitly on the existential experience as a Hong Kong artist: "A return to the East does not mean just a return to the tradition or to cut oneself off from the West, both are impossible. We are living in a place where the East meets the West; we grow in our tradition while our way of living is under the influence of the West. To escape would only mean to limit one's creativity".[24]

In a 1963 article entitled "The Reconstruction of the East", Wong described the aesthetics of Eastern painting as disinterestedness and as embracing a harmonious relation with Nature.[25] Instead of following the rules of perspective in Western painting, Wong saw Eastern painting as reflecting the principle of spiritual resonance, which transcends style or technique, as well as the bounds of nationality and culture. The only absolute, Wong said, is artistic freedom. This total freedom allows for the final transcendence of the East itself. In this sense, the incorporation of Western influences into Eastern art is certainly acceptable; it is always beneficial to learn from the West's forms of expression and materials and its developments in artistic movements. Wong's experimental painting, which merged the Western and Chinese ways, expresses his sense of the complimentarity of the two cultures. One example in particular is his painting of a Chinese landscape, entitled, *Purification #2* in 1979, using the form and texture of Western painting (Figure 40).

It should be noted that Wong was highly concerned about the role of the Hong Kong artist. For this artist, he said: "Rebellion is necessary when he wishes to break through the confines of his predecessors to make way for something new, personal … What is around him is vague, fluctuating, and shapeless. He has no sense of belonging; he lacks identity. However, with exceptional determination and convic-

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Wucius Wong, "Reconstruction of the East", newspaper article, publication information unknown, Hong Kong, 1963.

tion, he has an ample opportunity to mold the future".[26] Wong was skeptical of Western art vogues and wondered if modern art movements like Pop art had anything to relate or contribute to the living reality of Hong Kong artists.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, when Hong Kong artists' identity was being constructed in part by modernization and economic growth, the New Ink movement called for a return to the past. Distinctions between Chinese and Western paintings produced by local painters were unnecessary, according to Wong, because in his view *all* artistic expressions produced by Chinese painters—no matter what their form—were still Chinese paintings. However, he admitted that it was difficult to identify Hong Kong painting because it was ambiguous, contradictory, and contained split elements. The most important thing, he said, was to return to tradition for spiritual identification, which, according to Wong, should be the harmonious relation of man and Nature.

For various reasons, beginning in the 1980s, the 'Chinese complex' of the younger Hong Kong artists had lost its vigor. As the colony progressed to become a thriving international and commercial center, these artists preferred to follow artistic developments in the international community rather than remain within the Chinese tradition. The younger artists had more freedom to create, ironically, in a state of rootless-ness than the generation of artists before them. Chinese tradition was one of the young generation's options, yet they preferred the artistic vision in the West.[27] This movement can be viewed as a phenomenon of late capitalism which happened to parallel the early stages of colonial independence. The mass culture and entertainment industries had distracted people's reflections on problems of cultural identity, power structure in colonial rule, race, and social class. Furthermore, the planned return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 did not create a real sense of colonial independence, especially in terms of cultural influences. As a result of commercialization, art education curriculum in Hong Kong came to focus on Western techniques and concepts during the 1980s, and the trend continues today.

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[26] Wucius Wong, "Foreword to the Second Exhibition of the *In Tao* Painters," catalogue of the 2nd exhibition of the *In Tao* painters, publication information unavailable, Hong Kong, 1970.

[27] David Clarke, "Hong Kongness: Chineseness and Modernity: Issues of Identity in Hong Kong Art", *Hong Kong Cultural Studies Bulletin*, CUHK, Hong Kong, Issue 4, Winter, 1995, pp. 82-84.

Conclusion: Post-colonial Discourse and the Third Space

While the Hong Kong painters discussed in this essay based their artistic identity on either traditionalism or nationalism, they were also pushing forward and making important artistic innovations. Daring experiments like the New Ink and other modern movements—what one post-colonial discourse described as the liberation process in colonial territories—emerged during a time of uncertainty and of significatory or representational undecidability.[28] These changes arose out of a context in which most Hong Kong painters were busy producing works intended to meet Westerners' expectations of 'Chinese art'. However, while a grand tradition which many regarded as the primary source of creativity, Chinese traditional art had come to be seen as a limited source of inspiration years later. This was because its root had been seriously damaged during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in Communist China. Thus its influence in the colony had slowly diminished. In addition, Hong Kong's intense modernization process was a constant reminder to young artists that they were not living in old China, which made the work of what seemed a distant homeland seem less than relevant to their present context.

The colonial government's localization policy after the leftist political riots against British rule in 1967 was originally tied in with promotion, even propaganda, for a growing and modernized Hong Kong. Although likely not one of its intended outcomes, this policy laid the groundwork for Hong Kong's search for its identity through art. Yet generally speaking, people in Hong Kong find it more difficult to identify with Communist China (this was especially true immediately following the Cultural Revolution) than with China in a national sense. At the same time, they do not regard themselves as British. The situation points directly to the notion of third space in post-colonial discourse, which has been described as: "the 'inter', the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between, the space of what Derrida has opened up in writing itself that carries the burden of the meaning of culture".[29]

As Homi Bhabha has pointed out, the sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by an

[28] Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" in Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 206.

[29] Ibid., p. 209.

originary past and kept alive in traditions of a culture, is greatly challenged in the so-called third space in which the colonized group is caught between the traditional culture to which it had once belonged and the new colonial culture. Looking at it in the most positive light, this means that the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized, and read anew.[30] This happened in Hong Kong because of converging social, economic, and cultural forces. As described by Homi Bhabha: "assimilation of contraries, the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an inter-national culture, based on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity."[31] And in fact, emerging from the reflections on cultural identity by local painters is the search for an artistic identity for Hong Kong itself that is different from that of either East or West. Hong Kong identity has become, instead, an integration of the concepts, styles, and visual symbols of both parts of the globe.

It is said that pre-colonial cultural purity can never be fully recovered, because colonial cultures do occupy this third space. They have developed a dialectical relationship between the worldview of the colonizers and the impulse to reconstruct an independent local identity. As pointed out by Helen Tiffin, the so-called decolonization process invokes a continuous dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and a peripheral subversion of these systems.[32]

In essence then, those living under colonial power have taken on a hybrid identity. Under this new identity, they must ensure that traditional signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized, and read anew. The return to the traditional may be a strategy to establish a cultural identity that does not advocate an irreversible or essential history of culture.[33] With this understanding, assimilation of Chinese and Western traditions into a new modern tradition becomes a useful strategy and is a natural outcome of the hybrid identity of Hong Kong artists. Luis Chan, for example, whose life and work represented the spirit of Hong Kong, strove to define the colony's artistic identity. Lu believed that Hong Kong's artistic style was dependent on the freedom of the individual artist to create whatever he or she wished, like the New Ink painting integrating East and West or unrestricted, as long as they started with a good traditional foundation. Finally, for Wucius

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[30] Ibid., p. 208.
[31] Ibid., p. 209.
[32] Helen Tiffin, " Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse", in ibid., p.95.
[33] Homi K. Bhabha., in ibid., pp. 208-209.

Wong, a strong historical dynamic was to take hold in the art of Hong Kong. The aim of this paper has been, not to hold one of these artists' theories up as superior, but to bring their work to light so they might be more carefully examined. One thing, however, is clear: for the colony's art, its past is in China, its present is in Hong Kong, and its future lies in the whole world.[34]

[34] Wucius Wong, "Hong Kong Art Today," *Nan Bei Gi,* Hong Kong, 58 (3/1975), p. 49.

THE SHAPE OF ARTISTIC PASTS: EAST AND WEST*

Arthur C. Danto

In the Robert Ellsworth Collection of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Chinese Art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, there is an affecting work by Wan Shang-Lin (1739–1813), who, as a landscape painter, is said (in the neutral prose of this collection's spectacular catalog) "to have been influenced by Ni Tsan [1301–1374]."

The image on Wan's scroll (figure 41) is of a monk in a somewhat austere landscape, identified as Lung-men; but, as we know from the inscription, the image itself is less about its pictorial subject—the Lung-men monk—than it is about a painting of that subject by Ni Tsan (figure 42), which Wan may or may not have seen. It is intended for an audience that, in effect, can compare Wan's image with a recollected or imagined original—or that, in any case, knows enough about the work of Ni Tsan to be able to make comparisons.

The inscription itself exhibits a vigor singular by contrast with the rather pale and diffident image composed of trees, rocks, and the isolated itinerant. And though in no sense a student of calligraphy, I feel confident that the difference in stylistic address is intentional and meant to be appreciated as such: the disparity between writing and drawing exhibits that difference in affect between memory and waking perception that Hume identifies as a gradedness in vivacity. There is a tentative fadedness in the image, as if dimly recalled. This interpretation, of course, must be mooted by the fact that Ni Tsan's own style, in which strokes have the watery feel of washes, was itself intended to leave unresolved the question of whether the landscapes he was so fond of painting were themselves perceived or dreamt. They are almost languorous in consequence of this mood, which seeks to make as viv-

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idly as the subject allows the palpable undecidability of illusion and reality—after all, the question a monk might himself raise regarding the landscape through which he makes his meditative transit. Here is a poem *a propos* by Ni Tsan himself:

> When I first learned to use a brush,
> Seeing an object I tried to capture its likeness.
> Whenever I traveled, in a country or town,
> I sketched object after object, keeping them in my painting basket
> I ask my master Fang I,
> What is illusion, what real?
> From the inkwell, I take some inkdrops,
> To lodge in my painting a boundless feeling of Spring.

The inscription on Wan Shang-Lin's landscape in a certain sense instructs us as to how the subjacent image is to be appreciated; in particular, the inscription serves to connect it and its original, as it connects Wan and Ni Tsan, in a complex artistic network. Wan writes:

> I have seen two paintings of the Lung-men monk by Ni Kao-shih [Ni Tsan]. One belongs to Yao Hua Tao-Jen and one to the governor of Yaochou. Both have some brushwork of excellent quality, but neither can be judged with certainty as genuine. For eight or nine years, these two paintings have been puzzling me. Today is the sixth day of the ninth month, 1800, one day before the results of examination are to be published. We are gathered at the I t'ing Studio. I have been doing some sketches of hermits and suddenly the paintings came to mind. So, from memory, I have done this copy. If it has some similarities, it is as Tso-chan [Su Tung-p'o] says, "similarity in surface only." I feel embarrassed [for the quality of my work].

I

We may infer a great deal regarding the structure of the Chinese artist's world from these examples. There were, of course, no museums in our form of that crucial institution, and certainly none in which artworks from various traditions hang cheek-by-jowl under the same accommodating roof as in the paradigmatic encyclopedic museum we assume as the norm. But it would have been common knowledge in which collections works were to be found; the assumption is that these could be studied by scholar-artists.

It is clear that there were criteria of connoisseurship, as there always are when there is the practice of collecting and where the issue of

genuineness has some importance. We must not suppose that genuineness connotes authenticity, at least in the sense in which imitation connotes inauthenticity. It is no criticism of Wan Shang-Lin's painting *that* it is an imitation, but only one if it is, as an imitation, good or bad. After all, Wan's painting was preserved, not, I think, in the way we preserve copies of Poussin made by Degas (i.e., because Degas himself achieved an independent stature, and anything from his hand has meaning and certainly value in even the crassest sense of that term, though the copy from his hand also has interest because he *created* it.) I suspect, by contrast, that Wan's painting would have what value it has even if he did little else beyond imitations of Ni Tsan, who himself did imitations of earlier artists.

There was an important practice of imitating Ni Tsan—as the existence of two copies of the same work in known collections perhaps testifies—even though (or perhaps because), as Wen Fong writes, Ni Tsan was inimitable. According to Wen Fong, the artist Shen Chou (1427–1509) "nurtured a life-long ambition to imitate Ni Tsan," yet, according to one story, every time he applied his brush to paper his teacher would shout, "No, no, you have overdone it again!" So for half a millennium there can be traced a suite of paintings in the style of Ni Tsan, some of them, just as Wan Shang-Lin observes, possessing brushwork excellent enough that the question of genuineness can at least be raised. So the bland art-historical commonplace "influenced by Ni Tsan" scarcely serves to explain the complicated relationship in which the members of this history stand to one another, or to Ni Tsan himself. But neither does the word "imitated Ni Tsan" altogether capture as a description the action glossed by Wan Shang-Lin in his own inscription.

Here, I can but speculate on a tradition to which I am in every essential respect an alien, but at the least we can say that these imitations were not intended to deceive anyone, or to cause in them false beliefs about the provenance of the work. Something rather more like what Aristotle must have had in mind in the *Poetics* defined in this practice: "It is natural for all to delight in works if imitation."

Now, in truth, though irrelevant to his tradition, no one the least familiar with Ni Tsan's work could be taken in by this imitation. This is not simply because the authority of Ni Tsan's brushwork is absent even if all the standard motifs are there; the paired bare trees, for example, or the water and the rocks. Something else is absent, or, if you like, present in this painting, which could not have been present

in the original—so what is absent is a quality with which this presence is incompatible. Wan has his monk facing a cliff, which situates him in kind of enclosure, almost as though he had encountered an obstacle, whatever this may mean in the trackless atmosphere of monastic reality. The paintings of Ni Tsan, however, are marked by their abstract openness, their "boundless feeling." The empty paper becomes a kind of empty, dreamful space from which the possibility of horizons has been subtracted.

I do not know whether this emptiness was invisible to the Chinese artists who imitated Ni Tsan or not. There are, of course, always things that reveal the copyist: things he puts in without necessarily being conscious of doing so, because what is the original just makes no sense to him, and so he spontaneously compensates. Leo Steinberg, from whom I learned the revelatory utility of copies, points out that in *The Last Supper*, Christ is shown virtually without shoulders—essential (in Steinberg's view) to the larger compositional effect of the work, but anatomically impossible—so that copies of that work almost invariably "correct" the drawing. In late copies, indeed, Christ has the shoulders of a football hero. Possibly Wan Shang-Lin (who was, after all, working from memory) felt there had to be "something there," and so he unconsciously "corrected" his master, thereby transforming the work in an almost metaphysical way.

Or, there may be another answer. Imitations of Ni Tsan may have so concentrated on brushwork and motif that it became impossible to see the other components of the work, or to see the work in any other way. This can happen with work that is (pardon the phrase) "highly influential." I take the following example from Michael Baxandall: try to imagine how Cézanne would look to us if Cubism had never been invented. The meaning of Cézanne to counterfactual artistic traditions in other possible worlds is tantalizingly inaccessible. Suppose, in a similar fashion, that Chinese artists had come to admire the *spatialities* in Ni Tsan; then the quality of his lines might have become almost irrelevant, and someone could have been complimented on the success of an imitation of Ni Tsan, which, to an observer who *was* fixated on lines and brush strokes, would scarcely be seen as such.

But, of course, such an emphasis on spatiality was not the tradition. In the tradition that unites Ni Tsan and Wan Shang-Lin, the brushwork counts for everything. We also have to remember that, at least until well after the introduction photography into China in 1839, exact

resemblance was never an ideal. There was never in Chinese painting the defining ambition of Western art to dupe birds; at the most, one would want the vitality of one's brushwork to match the vitality of one's subject. So it would be enough, perhaps, for something to be considered an imitation of Ni Tsan that it should accomplish this, and, within these limits, the imitator had freedom to do what he wished; it would no more be expected that no one could the tell the difference between Wan and Ni Tsan than that no one could tell the difference between the painting of a tree and the tree itself.

"When every boulder or rock shows free and untrammeled inkstrokes, then the painting will have a scholar's air. If it is too laborious, the painting will resemble the work of a draftsman." So wrote Ni Tsan. Here we can begin to see the extreme difficulty—one would almost say the impossibility—of imitation as the Chinese understood it, and so understand its challenge. One must paint as the Master painted and, *at the same time*, be free and untrammeled. The imitation cannot be outward indiscernibilty; rather, the work must flow forth from the same internal resources, and painting in the style of Ni Tsan in consequence becomes a form of spiritual exercise.

We get a whiff of this possibility in our own culture, of course, in the instructions of the Guardians in Plato's *Republic*, though in the reverse direction. Plato worries that we will become what we imitate, and so we must have morally acceptable models. In my view, the Chinese thought was that we can imitate *only* if we in fact become like our model, however this is to be achieved. Outward similarities are what we might expect form a mere craftsman. It is the internal similarities that count. By 1800, Ni Tsan had become a legend and, in a sense, an imperative. Stories were told of him as a noble recluse, the embodiment of great virtues—purity, courage, equanimity in the fact of hardship—a man for whom vulgarity was the evil to avoid. Ni Tsan was like one of the Sage Kings! So he was constantly reinvented, cited as a precursor, and celebrated as a hero. In imitating Ni Tsan, one was making a moral stand, creating a narrative for one's life, filling the shoes of greatness. To say simply that one was "influenced by Ni Tsan" thus would be like reading in a life of Saint Paul that he was "influenced by Jesus Christ."

II

The philosophical shape of art history in China differed so from that of art history in the West that Wan Shang-Lin's narrative simply would not have been available for a Western painter of any significance; he could not have represented himself as situated in the kind of history in which Wan felt himself at home. We are, after all, speaking of a stretch of historical time that corresponds almost precisely to that which takes us from Giotto to Jacques-Louis David; hence, a period of periods growing out of and transcending one another in a way that pointed to a progressive vector. We have the three Vasarian cycles—anchored in Giotto, Masaccio, and Raphael; Mannerism, the Baroque, in which the Church was able to call on painters and sculptors and even architects to achieve illusory feats of which even a master like Masaccio would have been incapable. And we have the long age of the academies in which, by 1800, the state now rather than the Church was asking that artists articulate the values of the revolution and define the meaning of citizenship again in ways inaccessible to art near the beginning of this period.

Painting was the progressive discipline par excellence, and no one who took himself seriously as a painter would have wished to have been born at an earlier time, or would seek through imitation to reenact the works of earlier masters. To be sure, the Renaissance defined itself through a narrative that connected it with Greece and Rome, but this required a representation of the intervening time as merely dark ages, a time of lost skills that had to be rediscovered, and of ignorance that had to be driven away—a long descent into shadows from peak to peak of light. The next time something like this occurred was in the Pre-Raphaelite movement in England, where again the effort (audacious in conceptions when we think of the actual gifts of its major practitioners) was to dismiss as a kind of aberration everything from Raphael down—to make a new beginning, returning to the masters in an effort to relearn visual truth.

Between Wan Shang-Lin and Ni Tsan was the hapless Shen Chou, the painter of the Lung-men monk in the two versions known to Wan, if these were not (as very likely they *were* not) by Ni Tsan himself; and the many others who sought to preempt for their own life and work the style of Ni Tsan. None of these felt he was making a new beginning, or that between himself and the Master was a dark wood in which the art of painting wandered or languished. Wan's was a

vectorless history. Past and future were so of a piece that there was no conceptual room for modernity, and the concept of "influence" had to mean something different from what it would mean to a Western artist—an artist for example, who copied a predecessor, not caring about similarity, not matching himself against his model, but simply learning how something was done, miming the structure of art history itself to internalize and go beyond what came before. Michael Baxandall writes:

> "Influence" is the curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed prejudice about who is the agent and who is the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences. If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than Y did something to X. But in the consideration of good pictures and painters, the second is always the more lively reality … If we think of Y rather than X as the agent, the vocabulary is much richer and more diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand, refer to, pick up, take on, engage with, react to, quote, differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to, assimilate, align oneself with, copy, address, paraphrase, absorb, make a variation on, revive, continue, remodel, ape, emulate, travesty, parody, extract from, distort, attend to, resist, simplify, reconstitute, elaborate on, develop, face up to, master, subvert, perpetuate, reduce, promote, respond to, transform, tackle … Most of these relations just cannot be stated the other way round—in terms of X acting on Y rather than Y on X.

Raphael is often described as the most influential artist who ever lived, chiefly, I think, because his compositional strategies entered the curriculum and became the way that artists in academies were taught to compose well into the nineteenth century. But very few of the artists so influenced were influenced in the way in which Wan was influenced by Ni Tsan. There were, of course, artists who sought in a certain sense to paint like Raphael, say as Benjamin West did in portraying his family in *tondo* format based on Raphael's *Madonna della sedia*. But even in that case, there is a metaphorical reference being made, and a different order of rhetoric transacted than anything I find in Wan Shang-Lin.

I think one cannot too heavily stress the fact (without necessarily having to affirm so voluntarist a view of our relationship to the past as we find in Sartre, who says such dramatic things as that we *choose* to be born) that the past is very much a function of the present, in the sense that what causes us to act as we do is not so much the things that

influence us, as the representations of the past that define us as artists, and through which, say, Ni Tsan was constituted as the "influence" through which Wan Shang-Lin painted. Historical explanations accordingly do not carry us, as from cause to effect, from the influence to the influenced, but rather they must account for the representation—the complex of beliefs, feelings, and values—through which influence and influenced arise together as a historical unit. This may be the deep reasons why we might see in Ni Tsan things to which those for whom he was an influence were necessarily blind, and why, in a certain sense, the past yields facets for our admiration to which those contemporary with it, or more directly influenced by it than us, are blind. Monet was constituted a predecessor by the Abstract Expressionists by virtue of certain features of the Water Lily paintings becoming salient in the retrospective light of scale, all-overness, and freedom of brushing that could not have meant to Monet or his contemporaries what they came to mean for artists for whom Pollock opened up the past. Or think, for just these same reasons, how Fragonard's *Figures de fantaisie* were so greatly admired by artists in New York who visited the great Fragonard exhibition a few seasons ago, for whom *Progress of Love* (in the Frick Collection) were simply eighteenth-century paintings, whereas these were so spontaneous and free that some felt that the history of Abstract Expressionism should begin with them. I cannot imagine a future for art in which Fragonard's *Progress of Love*—unquestionably his masterpiece—should become an influence and a meaningful (because active) past. Possibly it is the mark of postmodernism that anything can become an influence at any time, a disordered past corresponding to a disordered present and future.

Since Vasari, to be an artist in the West has been to have internalized a narrative that determines the way we can be influenced by the past. The difference between Western and Chinese artists will then be a difference in lived narratives and modes of available influence. Modernism, alike in China and the West, meant the dismantling of these narratives and reconstitution of our relationship to the past.

III

Wan Shang-Lin lived in fortunate times, in that he could practice an art against a tradition that had not radically changed for five centuries. He could represent his work as simply seeking what the masters

sought, imitation being as good a means as any. His contemporaries in the West too, lived in fortunate times, at least in the sense that they saw themselves as belonging to a history which they understood what it would mean to continue. Not long after 1800 in France and in most of Europe, the cosmopolitan museum appeared—the Louvre, the Brera, the Rijkmuseum, the Prado, the Kunsthistorisches Museum were founded within a few years of one another—in which artists could study the masterpieces of their tradition.

As late as the Impressionists, artists were in the spirit of wholeness with their tradition. The Impressionists in particular saw their task very little differently from Vasari, as the conquest of visual appearances, of arranging colors across flat surfaces in such a way as to affect the retina as it would be affected by some scene in the real world to which the painterly array corresponded. They felt themselves closer to visual truth than their predecessors—hence, as continuing a tradition to which they belonged. Their discoveries regarding the colors of shadows belonged to the same progress as linear perspective, aerial perspective, chiaroscuro. They craved academic recognition. Even Rousseau, who saw himself as the great master of the modern, aspired to the Légion d'Honneur.

Modernism came about when this entire tradition was called into question by artists who no longer felt themselves to belong to it. And something of the same sort happened in China over much the same period. To be modern is to perceive the past as the locus of only negative messages, or things not to do, of ways not to be, or, of the paintings in museums as "les morts," as [Pascin] said in explanation of why he never went near them.

I think that modernity begins with the loss of belief in the defining narrative of one's own culture. When that narrative is strong and taken simply as the way things are, it is almost impossible to be influenced by another culture. After all, from the establishment of mercantile routes, works of art were imported into the West. Chinese porcelains appear in the Dutch still lifes of the seventeenth century, but merely as objects to hold fruit, though, of course, as we know, there was a demand for pottery in the Chinese style from the fact that it was broadly imitated around 1700 by the potters of Delft.

A great deal of such importation and imitation can occur without the premises on which cultural complacency rests being greatly shaken. Who can forget the atmosphere of exotisme/erotisme of Odette's drawing room with its Japanese lanterns and Chinese pots,

its screens and fans and cushions of Japanese silks, the innumerable lamps made of porcelain vases (and some Turkish beads), though the marvelous lantern, suspended by a silken cord, was lit from inside by a gas jet "so that her visitors should not have to complain of the want of any of the latest comforts of Western civilization," as Proust writes archly. The superiority of Western civilization was never doubted, and one of the premises of Victorian anthropology was in effect that there is a moral direction in history as there is in evolution, that societies and species evolve toward optimality, and that Western Europe was history's masterpiece just as homo sapiens was nature's masterpiece.

The superiority of Chinese civilization was no less an axiom of those who lived it. The relationship to the outside, fundamentally, would be one of curiosity; the outside was the object of curiosity in the double sense of embodying strangeness, as in "curio," and as something to understand—as an object of scientific curiosity.

The outside in neither sense was something we might aspire to as a form of life. Kant, who must have learned about the South Seas from Captain Cook's *Voyages*, sees them as places where lives of extreme pleasure and indolence can be led, but not, he argues, lives we can rationally will for ourselves. Neither could we rationally will to live the lives that ethnographers began to explore and chronicle throughout the nineteenth century. The presumption, rather, was that these lives were like living fossils, stages through which "we" had advanced; and a complex narrative was assumed in which the savages of Africa and Oceania were "ourselves,' seen through the wrong end of the telescope of social evolution—just as they, looking through the right end, could see "themselves" as us. We would be the goal toward which it was the White Man's Burden to conduct them.

There was an empirical question, I suppose, as to whether their stage of social development did not also mark a correlative stage of intellectual development, so that they could not master the form of life toward which they could merely evolve. Our task was that of shepherds, giving them some skills useful to them (and economically valuable to us.) The African who aspires to a European form of life would, as a result, be thought of essentially as an object of comedy—an attitude that surprisingly lasted well into the 1950s in such novels as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. Indeed, the "Other" in Western art, whether the pygmy, as even in the paintings of Pompeii, the Hottentot, or the Chinese in eighteenth-century French painting, would be like other eighteenth-century paintings, for example, of monkeys doing such

things as painting pictures or playing instruments, or of small children conducting flirtations—all as very largely comical, as occasions for reflecting on our own superiority (as when we watch primates doing nearly human things in the zoo). Parallels are to be found in Chinese art as well.

IV

For me, the deep change, and indeed the beginning of modernism, begins in the West when Japanese prints become objects, not of curiosity, but of influence. Consider how much had to be forged before they could be received as influences! Monet collected Japanese prints, as Matisse and Derain collected African masks and figures. But Van Gogh and Gauguin decided to *constitute* the masters of the Ukiyo-I print as *their* predecessors, as Picasso determined that a tradition in the Ethnographic Museum of the Palais de Trocadero constituted the relevant past for the Demoiselles d'Avignon.

In the case of Japanese art, it was not simply that these works stopped being objects of charm and curiosity and exoticism—connoting, as in Odette's overheated interior, pleasures forbidden by the moral world embodied in the bourgeois decor she was anxious, as a high-class courtesan, to put at a distance. It was, rather, that these prints showed the *right way* to represent as art; and, if these prints were right, an entire artistic tradition was wrong and an entire mode of artistic progress was shown to be beside the point.

Part of this change had to do with the treatment of space, part with the ideal of an illusion that three-dimensional space, whose conquest was the glory of Western art, made possible. Gauguin drew everything toward the surface, rejected chiaroscuro, flattened his forms by bounding them with heavy lines—though like Odette, who took it for granted that she should use gas to illuminate her lantern, Gauguin benefited from the easy availability of manufactured pigments to get colors in a relatively pure stage, defined as "coming from the tube." (It was by and large chemical pigments that finished off the Japanese print.)

In desituating his own art from his own tradition, accepting as influences the Japanese masters, Gauguin simultaneously was engaged in a piece of cultural criticism: he explicitly said, when he considered relocating to Tonkin, "The West is rotten."

I cannot here discuss the reverse impact of Western representational strategies on China, but the Ellsworth collection presents us with an art-world under powerful transformation—corresponding, I suppose, to the immense social and economic changes China was undergoing during the same period. But, unmistakably, when the Chinese artist allowed himself to employ Western strategies—aiming at likenesses, using illusory space and chiaroscuro, exploiting shadows and illuminational sources, altering the canon of acceptable subjects, behaving in ways Ni Tsan would certainly dismiss as "vulgar"—this, too, was an act of cultural criticism, a calling into question of an axiom of cultural supremacy. My own first impression in walking through the Ellsworth collection was that in some mysterious way, Chinese art had begun to look *modern*, as if "Modern" were a style of historical dismissal.

And, of course, it is. Chinese art and Western art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are almost locked in that kind of ironic relationship we find in O. Henry's famous story, where each character sacrifices what the other admires in it—where the comical denouement would consist in the Chinese proudly displaying a work in faultless perspective to a Western artist—who, in turn, has achieved a perfect oriental simplicity and languorous ambiguity of form.

V

There have been three strikingly different narrational moments in Western history, moments in which the present means something different because the past to which it is related means something different. The first, of course, is the Renaissance, which is a narrative of recovery—a plot of having, losing, and finding once again. Here the deep historical question is, *why* was it "lost" and *how* was it "found" again. Gibbon's answer—"Barbarism" and "Christianity," respectively—is an answer to the question that presupposes this sort of narrative, though, of course, it has in its own form something of a Christian cadence of paradise, Fall, and redemption to paradise. I am not certain that such a narrative would have insinuated itself in the minds of historical theorists, were it not for the concept of the Fall. The narrative itself, of course, had come to an end; once risen, we are never to fall again. So, in an important sense, *history itself was over*, and we thus passed into an age of academies.

The second narrational moment is the Enlightenment, which, after all, furnished the logical shape of what came to be Victorian anthropology. It was, in Kant's powerful and moving expression, "Mankind's coming of age." History was a vectored progress marked by growth and stages. If contemporary culture really is mature and superior (as adults are presumed superior to children by being rational masters of their own lives, whose growth is behind them), then either we can say that history is *over*, or that we have reached a stage beyond which we can only imagine things like the Superman. For Nietzsche simply continues the Enlightenment narrative, agreeing in large measure with its logic, but dismissing the complacency of regarding homo sapiens europanensis as the apex. Zarathustra is there to help us onto the next stage, as those who felt the White Man's Burden undertook the obligation to bring the stragglers abreast of us in the confidence that this was the last redeeming stage of history—what made it all worthwhile.

The third narrative moment is Modernism, which, in my view, begins in the mid-1880s with Van Gogh and Gauguin, who repudiated the entirety of their own artistic pasts and sought their influences elsewhere, in Japan, or Egypt, or Polynesia—the art of which was (in Gauguin's view) finally more "cerebral," or, as Picasso said, more "reasonable," than that with which it had spontaneously been contrasted. Both of these artists, Van Gogh and Gauguin, undertook to enact their beliefs by dramatic dislocation: Van Gogh went to Arles because he was looking for a reality whose visual representations would be like Japanese prints, and Gauguin went to Tahiti, where he had to carve his own Polynesian idols.

The historical problem or central question of modernity, in my view, is: what happened to account for the representation, by these artists, of their own past as less relevant for them than the imagined past of other cultures? What accounts for the profound shift in self-evaluation between the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1850, and the Exposition Universelle of 1889? The philosophical problem is the logical form of such explanations and the analysis of historical causation, when the effect is narrative representations that may or may not be true. Wan Shang-Lin would still be correctly described as "influenced" by Ni Tsan, even if Ni Tsan did not exist—even as Gauguin was "influenced" by an art that—it was one of the profounder disappointments of his voyage out to Tahiti to discover—did not exist. It is as though we had effects without causes.

I have neither a historical explanation of the modernist narrative to offer nor a philosophical analysis of the logic of such historical explanations. But I do want to say something about how modernism in art realized itself. Political circumstance, for better or worse, aborted this development in China, as it did in the Soviet Union, and as it would have done in Germany had Nazism, with its strong views in regard to modernism as *entartete Kunst*, triumphed.

When Braque and Picasso were coinventing Cubism, Braque afterward wrote that they stopped going to museums. Braque had haunted the Egyptian collections of the Louvre when he arrived in Paris in 1902, and I have already mentioned Picasso's fascination with the Trocadero. There is a story about Braque driving with his wife through Italy, stopping in front of a museum, and saying: "Marcelle, you go in and look around and tell me what's good in there." He was anxious not to spoil his eye with old painting (François Gilot tells us), and nothing could more eloquently express the attitude toward the past that is proper to the modernist narrative. No one, inevitably, puts it better than Picasso:

> Beginning with Van Gogh, however great we may be, we are all, in a measure, autodidacts—you might almost say, primitive painters. Painters no longer live within a tradition and so each one of us must recreate an entire language. Every painter of our times is fully authorized to recreate that language from A to Z. No criterion can be applied to him *a priori*, since we don't believe in rigid standards any longer. In a certain sense, that's a liberation; but at the same time, it's an enormous limitation, because when the individuality of the artist begins to express itself, what the artist gains in liberty he loses in the way of order. And when you're no longer able to attach yourself to an order, basically, that's very bad.

One can interpret these comments in two ways. One is a way recommended by Ernst Gombrich in his influential history of art, wherein he concludes by saying: "There is no such thing as 'art,' there are only the individual artists." Or one can say that the philosophical question of the nature of art becomes urgent, all the more so in that the connection with the past has been broken, leaving only a kind of negative aesthetics: "*not* this; *not* that."

One response to this dilemma has been the creating of a modernist aesthetic, which is essentially ahistorical. Formalist analysis cuts across all times and all cultures, making in effect, every museum a "Museum of Modern Art." All art exists for display and formal delectation,

across an aesthetic distance. All art—the Dogon figures, the watercolors of Wan Shang-Lin, the works of Picasso—stands outside life, in a space of their own, metaphorically embodied in the Plexiglas display case, the bare white gallery, the aluminum frame. When one seeks a deeper connection between art and life than this, modernism is over.

That is our present situation. The effort to reconnect to life through reconnecting with the past, as in the referential strategies of postmodernism, is pathetic. Formalism is finally unsatisfying, and the need for a philosophy of art under which art is responsive to human ends is a matter of absolute priority. It is the mark of living in the posthistorical period that we face the future without a narrative of the present.

HOW TO MISUNDERSTAND CHINESE ART: SEVEN EXAMPLES

David Carrier

This lecture is for Alfreda Murck

There is a large literature in English devoted to modernist and contemporary Chinese art.[1] *Artforum* publishes on line in Chinese and English, though it has relatively few reviews from China. But while specialists in the arts of China appeal to the theories developed by experts in Western art, rarely if ever is the process reversed. No Chinese theories influence Western academics. No living mainland Chinese artist, creative writer, or intellectual is famous in the West. Art from outside Europe is marginalized.

This lecture extends the account of my recent book *A World Art History and Its Objects*.[2] That account focused on the period before the present, when China and Europe were far apart. Wang Hui (1632-1717) could hardly have understood his near contemporary Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665). Like many Chinese artists, Wang recycled earlier forms of painting, while Poussin, in the manner of all European old masters, created a highly original personal style. But now many Chinese artists show and work in the West, and a great deal of Chinese art is shown. And so we expect that these traditions are close enough to be mutually accessible. That, at least, was my assumption before getting to Beijing.

It is easy to misunderstand a distant culture.[3] When a Chinese friend suggested that we have 'snake food', I was eager to go along to

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[1] See, for example, Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Zurich: Scalo, 2006); Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1996); Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis; Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998); and *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong, China: Timezone 8, 2008).

[2] *A World Art History and its Objects* (University Park and London, 2008).

[3] This is a more dramatic version of a problem found already within Western culture. When Arthur Danto's treatise *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* was

make up for an earlier occasion when I had chickened out. But in fact, her accented English misled me. She was saying something less exciting, 'snack food'. Other examples are more complex. When I explained to a friend the well-known 1950s American debate about who lost China, she was genuinely puzzled that we believed China was America's to lose. My leftist Western perspective had not prepared me to consider how very odd I sounded.

I consider seven artists whose exhibitions in the mainland and Taiwan have impressed me. Wu Guanzhong and Chang Da-Chien, Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang (the Gao brothers), Ji Dachun, Wang Guangle, and Sui Sichong. Chang Da-Chien was born in 1899 and Wu Guanzhong in 1919.[4] My other artists are born after the birth of the People's Republic, 1949: Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang in 1956 and 1962; Ji Dachun in 1968; Wang Guangle in 1968; and Sichong in 1982. I work in an empirical way, seeking unbookish accounts, describing varied art without offering an historical narrative. My assistant Liu Haiping gave me many ideas and helped me interview the Gao brothers, Ji Dachun, and Wang Guangle; and my students listened to my interpretations.

Born in 1919, the son of a poor primary school teacher, Wu Guanzhong entered the National Hangzhou Art College in 1936 and followed that school when during the Japanese invasion it moved inland.[5] In 1947, he won a fellowship to Paris, but after graduation returned in 1950 to China, where he survived much politically motivated criticism. "Art is wild," he said, "and the crucial point of an artist lies in individuality. An artist ought to refuse to be fed by others, run his own course, and keep his spirit and style at any price." And that is what he has done. No wonder that his political enemies called him a formalist. During the 1960s, refused permission to paint, Wu was forced to live in the countryside. His sense of humor survived this perilous life.

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translated into French, it was necessary to add notes explaining his topical allusions to art, local politics, and popular music. Translating the book into Chinese, as has been done, has to be much more difficult.

[4] Wu Guanzhong died in Hong Kong on 25 June 2010, after this article was written. (Editor)

[5] Here I incorporate material from my review with Liu Haiping, "Wu Guangzhong, National Art Museum of China," *Burlington Magazine*, CLI (May 2009): 348-9.

Early on Wu was a gifted imitator of French early twentieth century modernism. But then, starting in the 1970s, he discovered his roots in Chinese visual culture. Some pictures may appear related to Western abstractions. But unlike his Western contemporaries Wu always remains a figurative painter. In that way, he is very much associated with Chinese tradition. "Beauty is conceived in life," he writes. "Life is endless, and so is beauty."[6] He is a great artist because he makes incredibly varied pictures, never settling into a signature style; because his varied landscapes show his unfailing love for his native land; because he has continued in old age to develop marvelously; and because his triumphant survival has enabled him to develop a unique synthesis of the visual cultures of Western modernism and his own country. "I wish to build a bridge between the East and the West," he has said, "between laymen and experts, and between the concrete and the abstract." He has succeeded magnificently. Chinese political life seems not to have entered his art, which is always about visual pleasure. "Seeking beauty is my profession and obligation. It is the entire purpose of my life."

Chang Da-Chien (1899–1983) also bridges the gap between China and the West. His subjects are like those of old master literati artists, but his sense of color owes much to his long experience of the West. Chang's miraculous ability to control his paint, allowing him to use washes and line, and make calligraphy, may remind Westerners of de Kooning.[7] But unlike his American peer, he always grounds pictures in nature. In the West, abstraction is the product of a dialectical reversal of the search for perfected illusionism. Because Chinese painting typically hovered between figuration and abstraction, this concern with abstraction is less important.

The Gao brothers (Zhen b. 1956 and Qiang b. 1962) do political paintings, photographs, and sculptures. Here is one of their montages, a forever-unfinished building. (Figure 43) And some of their recent art depicts prostitution. I focus on their hugging performances. The hug is such a simple physical gesture that no instruction is required.

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[6] *Cultivation and Devotion: Works of At Donated by Wu Guanzhong*, Prefaces by Fan Di'an and the artist, essays by Shui Tianzhong, Kwok Kian Chow, and Wang Xiomei (Beijing: National Art Museum, 2009), full colour ills, 436 pp, ISBN: 978-7-102-04556-6. 800 RMB. Quotations from *Wu Guanzhong* 9, 273, 236, 134.

[7] See Chen Tinghou, *Chinese Calligraphy*, Trans. Ren Lingjuan (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2003).

But hugging is not universal. Italians and many Americans hug easily, but Chinese, like the English, are not so physical.

The Gao brothers asked some construction workers to hug in the nude. Some were willing to do this for 50 RMB, while others, who preferred to remain clothed, received only 20 RMB. They did hug performances at night in winter. The police were only willing to shake hands. They have also done these performances abroad; on their web site you can view a hug performance in Berlin. It's obvious that their Mao sculptures are political. But it takes a little time to understand how their hugs also are important social commentary. How people hug reflects their social relationships, and so also their politics. No wonder that the Gao brothers are highly controversial. After our long interview, conducted in Chinese, I rose to the occasion. When I departed, we hugged.

Ji Dachun (b. 1968) paints animals, objects, and people typically isolated on a white background field. His *Duchamp Brand* (2006) makes an obvious enough reference to a Western icon, Duchamp's *Fountain*. Indeed, his sense of erotic humor, as here in "Fuck Pig" (2003) has some affinities to Duchamp's. But *Omega* (2006) is more enigmatic. The title refers to the upscale watch, but the yellow form makes a different allusion, familiar to the Chinese. Overseas Chinese are called bananas, because they are yellow on the outside but white within. The name of female punk group 'Yellow banana' plays on this phrase. In Taiwan, it is pejorative, but in Beijing it's a neutral description.

Some of Wang Guangle's (b. 1978) *Coffin Paints* are large dark gray canvases.[8] Others, somewhat smaller, are heavily painted panels, which use layers of pigment to build up heavy surfaces. (Figure 44) Finding Wang's Terrazzo paintings in a Chelsea gallery, I would think them a shrewd commentary on Sylvia Mangold's representations of floors. And his smaller *Coffin Paints* could allude to Joan Baer's around-the-edge abstractions. Western critics have been much preoccupied with the death of painting. I imagined that Wang's title should be *Coffin Paintings*, alluding to the so much recently discussed death of art. But in fact his Chinese phrase, 'Shou Qi', literally means 'the paint praying for longevity of the coffin'. In late middle age, some Chinese people purchase their coffin and repaint it every year, hoping

[8] Here I incorporate material from my review, "Wang Guangle. Beijing Commune," *Artforum*, Summer 2009: 360-61.

thus to achieve longevity. These paintings have a very specific Chinese reference. Wang imagines that his pigment asks to live. According to the label on the entrance wall, Wang "sets up a world of sheer 'spirit' and 'feeling' for the transferring of the 'object'." Doing this, he "makes us feel lost between the importance of painting and man himself." I asked him if he was interested in Robert Ryman. Robert who?, he asked. The *Six Elements* of Hsieh Ho, the classical articulation of a Chinese aesthetic, says that painting requires Spirit Resonance, Bone Method, Correspondence to the Object, Suitability to Type, Division and Planning, and Transmission by Copying. Here we are far from Alberti, Vasari, or even Ernst Gombrich. But when we get to contemporary art, we may expect that artists will think in something like our Western terms. But Wang does not. His *Coffin Paints*, which look like Chelsea abstractions, in fact are representation.

Sui Sichong, *The Last Situation* (2006) shows a dinner viewed from above. The meal is almost finished, and it's not a happy situation. A Western boy wants to marry a Chinese girl, whose mother reads a Beijing newspaper. In contemporary China, marriages with foreign males commonly are sources of cultural conflict. The details are meticulously observed. That the mother has left her chopsticks in a bowl is a bad sign. She doesn't approve this marriage. To understand this picture in a direct way, you need to be Chinese or, at least, very immersed in Chinese culture.

He studied at Beijing Film Academy and so may have been inspired by filmmaking. This image shows the end of a dinner or lunch. The size of the room, the bricks on the floor, the small sofa covered by a typical Chinese bamboo matting, the electric fan, the white heater on the left side of the picture, the two small tables in the room, the small dog under the dinner table, the two pieces of dishcloth and the handkerchief box on the heater: they tell us that this is the home of a normal Chinese family. At the dinner table are four blue and white porcelain plates, cheap Chinese dishware. In the four plates are skin of tofu, pickles, a peach, and a rice dessert. This dessert is cut or touched by the foreigner boy's and the Chinese girl's two pairs of chopsticks, their chopsticks touching and crossing at the top. There are two small plastic bags on the table. Everything here, the dishes and the food, indicate that this is street food, not cooked in the family home, but bought from a restaurant or market.

There are three people at the table. A young foreign boy with glasses and short hair is wearing a black shirt. And the Chinese girl in a sum-

mer dress is wearing cheap jewelry. They sit nearby each other cutting dessert with their chopsticks in their right hands, their left elbows, arms, and hands on the table. The boy and girl have a close relationship. Maybe they are married or want to get married. In China, when couples have an informal dinner or lunch with the Chinese girl's mother in her home, that means that they have a serious relationship.

These three people are not talking with each other, and the mother's quite far from the table; her Beijing newspaper is a wall between her and the couple, perhaps because she cannot speak English with them. (Normally middle-aged Chinese women cannot speak English.) We cannot know what she is really thinking. But the mother's position tells us that her attitude is critical. If she didn't at least consider accepting the relationship, there would never be this meal in her home. But she doesn't accept it, for such a marriage is different from what she wishes for her daughter. This daughter has a different life style from her mother. Accepting this change is very difficult.

Like William Hogarth's *Marriage a la Mode, The Last Situation* is a genre picture. Just as these eighteenth-century European artists are concerned with humble everyday scenes and not the grand historical subjects of Poussin, so too Sui Shong deals with a domestic setting and not the larger political issues presented by many senior Chinese painters. Using photography he extends this Western tradition.

The Last Situation #6 is one in a sequence of photographs showing dinner tables viewed from above. Through dinner tables, through eating scenes, showing different classes, everyday life of China, a food-obsessed country, is nicely presented. *The Last Situation #1* shows a lavish banquet. And, finally, in *The Last Situation #9* a baby is tended by his rustic grandparents, a very typical Chinese scene.

Western viewers see the picture differently than do Chinese people. A generation ago, many Americans were shocked by interracial marriages. But now, when we have our first African-American president, an Americanized *The Last Situation* would be as artificial as a scroll painting made by a white person. Still there is a difference in kind between being inside a culture and merely being an empathetic viewer from outside, as I am. We Westerners can learn a great deal about China's art and history, enough, surely, to understand *The Last Situation*. But even then, there is a real gap between the nature of our knowledge and that of a Chinese person. Any Western teacher in China is aware of this problem. The concepts, the vocabulary, and indeed the ways of thinking that we take for granted are exotic in

China and so need to be explained. To teach our art requires more than mere translation, it demands that we explain a whole exotic worldview. But the Chinese, in turn, know the difficulties Western scholars have in grasping the most basic concerns of their traditional art.

A friend and I went together on successive evenings to the Beijing Opera and Tosca. She could hear directly the expressiveness of the Chinese music, while for her understanding Tosca takes some work. I had just the opposite reaction. This difference does not merely reflect our differing linguistic competence. Even were I to have supertitles, still this style of Chinese music is exotic to me. And even when reading the English supertitles and the Italian libretto, Puccini is exotic for her. This contrast in how Chinese and Westerners experience music is analogous, I suggest, with the contrasting ways we understand visual art.

Recently there has been a great deal of discussion about application of Western categories to the art of China. We all are aware now of the danger of imposing Eurocentric ways of thinking on a country whose history and visual culture are very unlike that of America and Europe. In her account of old master Chinese art, Alfreda Murck describe the preference for indirection as a way to preserve face and avoid giving offense. Today, as under the old regime, one is aware of the need for self-censorship.

In the West, the recent development of art criticism is tied to the tradition inaugurated by Clement Greenberg. I tell this well-known story very briefly. To validate Abstract Expressionism, Greenberg linked this great American painting to modernist tradition in journalist essays. His successors, Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried and, now, to cite people at this conference, Hal Foster, Terry Smith and, in Germany, Hans Belting, offer highly sophisticated accounts; and James Elkins has provided commentary on this process.[9] As a working critic, I do not belong to this academic tradition; but that is another story. Because this is such a distinctively American tradition, similar developments in China would be unlikely. China really is another world, with a distinctive history and so is likely to develop in ways we Westerners cannot predict and will not find it easy to understand.

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[9] See my review, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee eds., on www. caa reviews.org.

Achieving cross-cultural understanding feels miraculous. In this opening up, suddenly I am with another, so that thoughts, which lose their identity as my thoughts, can be articulated through our shared world. It's not that I an in contact with another, but, rather, that I become with another (an obscure but revealing phrase) something more than my mere self. What I see; what you see: they are intimately gathered together. It's not simply that I am interested in your judgment, which may differ from mine. No! It's our judgment that emerges, in a sharing in which dividing up credit makes no sense. But as we have seen, interpretative failure is all too likely. Before I arrived, I had some ideas about Chinese art; now I have fewer, and soon, I shall have none. Thus I progress.[10]

[10] I thank Anna Brzyshi, Marianne Novy, and Joachim Pissarro for their comments.

ART AND GLOBALIZATION: THEN AND NOW*

Noel Carroll

… We seem between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, we want to say that it is undeniable that we have entered a new era of globalization both in general and with respect to art. But, on the other hand, with just a little pressure, the notion of globalization in both respects appears to come apart. For, not every nation in the world is an equal partner in this global dance, and, even those parts that are involved in transnational enterprises are often more regionally engaged than globally. The world is not as pervasively connected as is often imagined. Moreover, the tendency towards cultural and artistic exchange, influence, and even borrowings that result in hybridization is not something recently arrived with the Internet. It has been happening at varying speeds whenever civilizations meet. So, must we give up the idea that something has changed?

I don't think so. Something has changed, but the concept of globalization, construed as a Hegelian *zeitgeist*, is not a fruitful way to articulate the change. Rather than thinking of the present in terms of a totality, governed by an animating essence that is refracted in its every dimension, we are better advised to think on a smaller gauge. First, let us think in terms of transnational relations, rather than global relations, where it is understood that there are many different, often very unalike, kinds of transnational relations, and that these don't add up into a cohesive global network playing the same tune in different registers. Undoubtedly, one reason we speak of globalization has to do with the vast multiplication of actors and sites of exchange than heretofore.[1] And there are certainly more transnational activities going on than ever before, if only because there are more nations, more people,

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[1] Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* trans. by Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 36.

and more ways to connect them. But there is no reason to suppose that these fit into a neat package that can be labeled informatively with a summary adage like the Hegelian catchphrase "In the ancient world, one is free." We cannot say, for example, that "Today, all are connected in some ineluctably global way." Things are more fragmentary than that.

Nevertheless, there may be something unprecedented about some of the fragments—some of the parts—that co-exist in the present transnational moment. So rather than attempt to say something about the global condition as a whole, we may try to say something about some of the *forms* taken by the transnational relations that are starting to evolve in new directions.[2] That is, what is called globalization may begin to be parsed in terms of the increase of the available modes of organization for the transnational construction of new versions of the kinds of cultural structures that previously discharged their social functions more locally. Or, in other words, the question is better posed as: are any novel transnational institutions or practices coming into being? My own sense is that the answer to this question is *yes*. Specifically, I think that an integrated, transnational institution of art is assembling itself before our very eyes.[3]

Who could possibly be in a position to pronounce authoritatively upon the direction of art worldwide today? Although it is undoubtedly absurdly over-reaching, given the sheer amount of work at issue, to pretend to be able to say anything informative about the present course of art internationally, perhaps I can state my claims somewhat less ridiculously by framing them as tentative hypotheses—provisional and certainly fallible hypotheses. I don't believe that I am on top of nearly enough data to be certain of my conjectures: I'm not sure who is. But insofar as we need conjectures to orient future research, if only critically, let me, in the hope of advancing the discussion, speculate on my suspicion that there is currently evolving an integrated

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[2] This emphasis on the forms that current transnational relations are taking is a theme of Roland Robertson. See, for example, his "Mapping the Global Condition: Globalization as the Central Concept," in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, edited by Mike Featherstone (London: Sage Publications, 1990, 1992), pp. 15-30. See also: Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

[3] Freely adapting the vocabulary of Arjun Appadurai, we might also call this integrated transnational institution of art a *culturescape*. See: A. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy), in *Global Culture*, pp. 296-300.

transnational institution of art or, at least, an interlocking set of transnational institutions.

One objection to the existence of something we might call a global institution of art is that not everyone we are inclined to call an artist belongs to it. In Bali, there are traditional artists engaged in reproducing the statues of gods and goddesses which populate the many Hindu temples on the island. Because the native clay from the local riverbed is soft, these statues need to be replaced every thirty years or forty years or so; they deteriorate so quickly. And there is a whole cottage industry devoted to this project. But no one supposes that these artists belong to the same art world as Jeff Koons does, even though they too are sculptors.

They are artists, but they are not part of the international art world that stages biennales relentlessly and that stocks those burgeoning museums of contemporary art that are sprouting up with abandon everywhere in the urbanized world. Nor are the Balinese artists who continue to make traditional folk art for sale to tourists participants in the Art World International.

Nevertheless, this objection to the notion of global art does not really touch my hypothesis that there is aborning an international institution of art. For, I wish to maintain no more than that this institution is transnational and not that it is global, where that is assumed to entail that every artist belongs to it. Not everyone we are disposed to label an artist belongs to this transnational institution. Indeed, not everyone who is an artist, properly so-called, is probably even admissible in principle to this transnational institution.

So the notion of a transnational institution of art dodges the first objection that is generally leveled at global hypotheses. How does it fare against the second type of objection—namely, that the type of transnational interaction we see nowadays has been around for at least centuries, if not longer. My response is that what we are witnessing now differs from the past insofar as what we see emerging is something like a single, integrated, cosmopolitan institution of art, organized transnationally in such a way that the participants, from wherever they hail, share converging or overlapping traditions and practices at the same time that they exhibit and distribute their art on internationally co-ordinated venues. And this, I submit, is something worth considering to be substantially unprecedented.

In order to appreciate what is new about the emerging international institution of art, we need to contrast briefly the modalities of trans-

national art exchanges in the past and those of the present—that is, we need to think about art on the international stage then and now.

Artworks have perennially crossed cultural and ethnic boundaries, if not as barter, then as plunder. In the 1460s and 70s—that is to say, in the earliest stages of capitalism—cultural exchange between the east and the west abounded.[4] Artists such as Gentile Bellini and Costanzo da Ferrara were loaned by Venice and Naples respectively to Mehmet II after his conquest of Constantinople. Both subsequently returned to the west, bringing with them imagery and iconography that they encountered in the Near East.[5] The motifs imported by artists like these appeared frequently in European artworks. For instance, the carpet pictured in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* of 1533 is of Ottoman provenance.[6] However, the specific artists who influenced Bellini and Costanzo did not thereby become part of the western lineage; they were not, for example, cited by the likes of Vasari.

China was involved in a lively trade in porcelain long before Europe became interested in these art works. Between 800 and 1450, Chinese porcelain was a valuable export item in markets as far flung as Japan, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Egypt. Indeed, Chinese porcelain is first thought to have arrived in Europe via North Africa. By the seventeenth century, these artifacts were highly prized in Europe as well where the demand eventually resulted in the incorporation of western themes.[7]

The trade in Asian luxury items including metalwork, furniture and textiles, including textiles from India—useful art, but *art* nonetheless—became increasingly heavy from the seventeenth century onwards. With the rise of the bourgeoisie and the coincident refinement of European taste, Asian wares were often the objects of their aesthetic gratification. Likewise paintings and sculptures traveled westward. But what is noteworthy about this exchange from our contemporary perspective is that, while Europeans appreciated these artifacts and collected them, neither the works nor the masters who

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[4] Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London, 1996), especially Chapter Five.

[5] Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 32.

[6] Jardine and Brotton, p. 51.

[7] Rose Kerr, "Chinese Porcelain in Early European Collections," in *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800*, edited by Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffers (London: Victoria and Albert Publications, 2004), pp. 44-51.

produced them were incorporated into European art narratives or artistic canons. The narratives and canons remained stubbornly parochial.

A European might collect Chinese porcelain or drawings, or, for that matter, later, pre-Colombian art, but these collectibles and the artists who created them did not enter the "big story" of art as it was told in the west. That narrative and that canon remained resolutely local, as did the narratives and canons of the various lineages of non-western art. Non-western art could enter the story of art as an outside or external influence, but no non-Western artist was treated as a full-fledged citizen of the western art world and, to a large extent, vice versa. A parallel phenomenon is also observable in music where composers like Mozart adapted Turkish themes without any Turkish composers thereby figuring internally in the western lineage. The various traditions, though open to outside influence, were each essentially local or regional. There were multiple artistic histories which, though sometimes tangent, were nevertheless discrete.

As is well known, the Japanese colored woodcuts of the Ukiyo-e school of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries had a visible influence on Seurat, Manet, Van Gogh, Toulouse Lautrec, and Whistler, but, even though that influence is acknowledged in western art histories, the masters of the Ukiyo-e school are not included in the same genealogy as western artists. Though having a causal impact on that tradition, they were conceived to be as external to it.

Likewise, the influence of African tribal art on Picasso's invention of Cubism is widely acknowledged. But it is an outside influence on developments internal to the western artworld; no African traditions were thereby regarded as part and parcel of the story of art, or modernism, as told from the perspective of the west or the western insider. African art is not portrayed as one of the art-historical tributaries flowing into modern art. No African artist has a place in the story equivalent to a Manet.

That is, the historians of the western tradition do not, for example, track modernism as following from African art in the way in which we trace Cubism as evolving from Cézanne. Though Picasso was influenced by African art, there is no African artist or even African art formation in his lineage in the way that Cézanne is. Rather, we presume that we are dealing with at least two distinct art worlds here.

Similarly Asian aesthetics figures in the narratives that we tell of Ezra Pound and poetic modernism, and in our accounts of Bertolt

Brecht and the evolution of theatrical alienation effects. But we think of these Asian influences as opportunities certain western artists exploited in order to make certain moves within the western art world. The relevant aesthetic strategies were appropriated in order to short-circuit various traditional western approaches. They could function as counter-strategies. But, as counter-strategies, they do not have standing in their own right, on the basis of their own artistic identity, in the western art narratives in which they appear.

Thus, this sort of artistic exchange, though transnational, is not part and parcel of a *unified* art world, but occurs across different art world institutions, such as *Japanese* theater and *European* theater. Alien aesthetic discourses, as dragooned by westerners, were used to mark opposition to prevailing norms in the indigenous Northern Atlantic practice. Alternative aesthetics were, in such cases, manipulated rather than integrated; they are deployed for tactical advantages rather than being contributions to a mutually reciprocal conversation.

But it does now seem to be the case that the various national and regional centers of serious or ambitious fine art are beginning to be fashioned into a single world—a unified, transnational institution of art. Some evidence for this is the proliferations of biennales, of which, on a conservative estimate, there are more than fifty; it is said that there is now a biennale somewhere on the average of every two weeks.[8] Like film festivals, these high-art extravaganzas are partly predicated on attracting international tourism. But they also function to assemble large numbers of artists from different geographical regions and cultural backgrounds and thus to showcase, especially for curators, a wide range of work that can, in turn, feed into the ever-expanding museum and gallery systems worldwide. Artists such as Shirin Neshat and William Kentridge, for example, came to prominence through this network.

Moreover, this institutional network has also constituted a readjustment in the balance of power in the art world. As James Meyer notes "Within the new dispensation, it's the curators who travel the most, who see the greatest range of work, who have the broadest sense

[8] Richard Vine, "Report from Prague: Biennale Gamble Doubling Down," *Art in America* (Sept. 2005), p. 47. Higher estimates are also available. In his talk "The glocal and the singuniversal: reflections on art and culture in the global world," Thierry De Duve, cites a low of eighty biennales per year and a high of 140. His talk was given at the conference *Multiple Cultures in a Globalizing World* at the Mohile Parikh Center for the Visual Arts, Mumbai, India (14 Feb., 2006).

of practice; the curators whose activity (exhibition) is closest to the practice and has the greatest impact on it. Many critics today wonder why criticism is so enervated … [T]he vitality of critical debate appears to have shifted, at least for now, from discourse to curation. [I]t's the curator who is most informed, who is most able to articulate what's interesting and important in art practice."[9] Given the enhanced possibilities of communication and transportation, these curators provide a constant channel of information which flows from large scale exhibitions, to museums and galleries and then back again. The faxes, e-mails, and telephone lines are always vibrating with art news and art deals. Videocassettes and DVDs of work are constantly orbiting the planet. There is without a doubt at present an interconnected, international art circuitry regulated by curators bidding nomadic artists hither and yon in search of recognition and frequent flyer miles.

Furthermore, this is not just a distribution network. It has developed something like its own preferred idioms. A common experience that many have during a visit to quite a few biennales and other large scale transnational exhibitions is: where is the painting and the sculpture? These shows tend to be dominated by video, film, photography, installation pieces (often multi-media in nature), conceptual art, and performance art (often recorded by means of some moving picture medium).[10]

For example, at the 51st Venice Biennale, not one of the Chinese artists represented exhibited a painting. Of the artists from the People's Republic of China, Jun Yang showed a video installation titled *Hero—This is We*, Chen Chieh-Jen offered a slow motion film called *Factory*, Xu Zhen projected DVD segments on the oil tanks in the Arsenale, LiuWei had an installation piece comprised of a battery of flashing lights triggered by motion detectors, Wang Qiheng presented a DVD of himself discussing *fengshui*, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu offered a performance piece called *Farmer Du Wenda's Flying Saucer* which they

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[9] James Meyer, moderator, "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," *Art Forum International* (November, 2003), pp. 152-163.

[10] It should be noted that the situation changes somewhat if one focuses on international art fairs rather than biennales. One sees far less video and installation art (though still a great deal of photography) at events like Art Basel. The reason for this is obvious. Art fairs are about selling artworks to private collectors and non-institutional collectors prefer to own and display paintings and sculptures to things like videos and installation art. Nevertheless, I believe my emphasis on biennales here is justifiable, since biennales give us a sense of what it is that artists and presenters think is "the now thing."

attempted to launch unsuccessfully, while Yung-Ho Chang created a massive environment.

Likewise, the Taiwanese eschewed traditional painting and sculpture: Kuang-Yu Tsui and I-Chen Kuo served up videos, Chung-Li Kao presented a looped animation cum projector, and Hsin-I Eva Lin proffered an interactive Internet installation. Hong Kong's Anothermountainman and Chan Yuk-keung both presented installation pieces, while Sinapore's Lim Tzay Chuan unveiled a piece of conceptual art—a bathroom designed to show that art is useful.[11]

The South Korean artist Yeondoo Jung's piece was *Bewitched*, a slide projection named after the sixties' TV show in which he asked people to imagine their future which he then staged and photographed.[12]

Marcia Vetrocq's overall impression of the recent Venice Biennale was that "From full-room installations to individual monitors, video emerges as a dominant medium in both sections of the international show."[13]

Similar observations may be made of other influential largescale exhibitions. Documenta 10 was dominated by photography and Documenta 11 by photo and video projections and large scale installations. It is noteworthy that in a recent review of the Istanbul Biennial, only one drawing and one sculpture are mentioned; everything else discussed is an example of installation art, photography, video, etc.[14] Moreover, some of the artists who have been significant beneficiaries of the biennale network are moving image makers. William Kentridge is a draughtsman, but he is most respected for what he calls his "Drawing for Projection," including *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City After Paris* and *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old*. Shirin Neshat's reputation rests on films, such as *Rapture* and video installations like *Fervor*.

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[11] For descriptions of this work, see Susan Kendzulak, "Chinese Artists at the 51st Venice Biennale," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* (September, 2005), pp. 6-10.

[12] Andreas Schlaegel, "Yeondoo Jung," *Contemporary* (Special Issue on the Venice Biennale, n.d.), p. 107.

[13] Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Venice Biennale: Be Careful What You Wish For," *Art in America* (Sept. 2005), 114.

[14] Eleanor Heartney, "Report from Istanbul: Artists in the City," *Art and America* (December, 2005), pp. 55-57. Likewise, the *New York Times* review of the "Of Mice and Men" Festival in Berlin only seems to have had eyes for the videos, photographs, and installation art.

Perhaps backhanded confirmation of the tendency in the emerging art world that painting is being ousted from its pride of place is a recent biennale in Prague. Prague is a city with not one but two biennales; in order to distinguish it from other biennales, both worldwide and in the neighborhood, the cofounder Giancarlo Politi of the second biennale in Prague declared that it would be devoted primarily to painting because, he argued, painting is a critically undervalued medium to whose powers of visual gratification attention must again be paid.[15]

Supposing that in the emerging transnational art world painting and sculpture are losing ground—perhaps not absolutely but more probably proportionately—to video, film, photography, computer art, conceptual art, performance art, and installation art, it is hard to resist the observation that many of these art forms have been constructed on the basis of some of the very technologies that are transforming the wide world into a small world. Obviously, film, video, and photography are the sort of mechanically and electronically reproducible media that make it possible for the same artwork to be everywhere at once. Though an artist like Chung-Li Kao may choose to screen his film *Anti.mei.ology 002* in one place at a time, it could be shown at multiple sites simultaneously.

As already suggested, it is, to an important degree, this very possibility of "overcoming" space—by means of these very sorts of media—that instills in many the conviction that globalization is upon us. Thus, the popularity of photography, film, video, and, increasingly, computer, digital, and Internet art is itself *emblematic* of the emerging cosmopolitan art world insofar as these media are themselves cosmopolitan.[16] As one passes down the aisles of many large scale, international exhibitions with the walls covered with digital photographs and with monitors flickering down the corridor, one has the feeling that one is standing right in the middle of the so-called wired world. Sometimes the images, like the photographs of empty airport lounges by Martha Rosler and of tarmacs by Andreas Gursky, document the

[15] Richard Vine, p. 49.

[16] It should also be observed that there may be an economic element in the gravitation of biennales towards mechanically and electronically reproducible art, since it is very expensive to insure a painting or a sculpture for shipping, whereas a video cassette of a performance piece is readily replaceable for almost no money.

quotidian experience of the citizens of this new republic of art.[17] But, in addition, the preferred idiomatic media of this emerging institution also bear the expressive trace of its world spanning ambitions.

Though in an admittedly different way, conceptual art, another favorite contemporary art form, also—like video and photography—defies space, since it is frequently not tethered to a particular place inasmuch as a great deal of conceptual art is designed with the intention that seeing it *in situ* is not always necessary. Often you can get the point of a conceptual artwork by simply reading a description or seeing a picture of it. Where such conceptual art is essentially a matter of an idea, it is lighter than air and, like a joke, can move faster than the speed of sound anywhere.

Performance artworks and installation artworks, of course, are rooted to specific locations, however, much of the performance art at large scale international exhibitions is there by the grace of video, while, at the same time, a lot of installation art is multi-media, incorporating video, photography, audio recording and even computer technology.[18] These devices are deployed to represent and to probe the modern world. But they also manage indirectly—*in virtue of what they are*—to express something of its phenomenological pulse: its informational density and seemingly omnipresent communicative connectedness.

Needless to say, I do not mean to suggest by any means that painting and sculpture have vanished from the scene. My point is only that they are not the privileged art forms of the moment in the emerging transnational institution. And, moreover, several of the art forms that would appear to maintain that position—like video and photography—are media that, in addition to whatever else they symbolize, embody the message of globalization as, what Frederic Jameson calls, "the sense of an immense enlargement of communication."[19]

The base of the emerging transnational institution of art includes its network of co-ordinated venues, its "always-on-the-go" curatorial-

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[17] Pamela M. Lee, "Boundary Issues: The Artworld Under the Sign of Globalization," *Artforum* (Nov., 2003), p. 167.

[18] Though I am emphasizing the role that these artforms play in large scale international exhibition I would also like to add that these artforms are spreading across the world gallery by gallery and performance space by performance space as well. For example, in 1998 Geeta Kapur noted the upsurge of installation art in India. See Geeta Kapur, "Globalization and Culture: Navigating the Void," in *The Cultures of Globalization*, pp. 204-206.

[19] This quotation is cited by Pamela M. Lee, p. 166.

mangerial class, and its preferred productive idioms. But it is also held together by means of a number of shared discourses, both artistic and critical. Artists, presenters, critics, and just plain art devotées share a number of conceptual frameworks and hermeneutical strategies that facilitate understanding transnationally.

That is, the artist can presume that with respect to certain types of work, featuring certain types of iconography, the audience will be prepared to explore the work in light of various recurring concerns, preoccupations, or ideas. Often, these hermeneutical posits are articles of progressive politics, such as post-colonialism, feminism, gay liberation, globalization and global inequality, the suppression of free expression and other human rights, identity politics and the politics of representation, as well as a generic anti-establishmentarianism. A recent exhibition at MoMA's PS 1 in New York City, for example, takes day labor around the world as its theme and interrogates it from a generally radical perspective.[20] The critic and the informed audience member entering the gallery space can try out these hermeneutical keys to attempt to unlock the often obscure secrets of a rebus-like installation piece until she finds one that works, one that, in other words, yields a satisfying interpretation.

Perhaps needless to say, the dissemination of these concerns did not appear magically. On the one hand, the recurring political concerns are related to the fact that in urban centers around the world artists find themselves in many of the same contexts with their attendant problematics—including capitalism in particular and modernization in general.[21] Moreover, on the other hand, these themes have been circulated widely through critical discourse and they have even been showcased by means of international art world events like the "platforms"—the interdisciplinary lectures and conferences—that comprised Okui Enwezor's Documenta 11.

Of course, this process also involves assumptions on the part of the audience about what the artist might be up to. Much new art is involved in what is called institutional critique—critiques of the institution of the museum, of the system of biennales, of the commodification of art, and of the art world in general.[22] Apprized of such motifs,

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[20] Roberta Smith, "Agitprop to Art: Turning a Kaleidoscope of Visions," *New York Times: Arts Section* (11 Nov. 2005).

[21] I owe this point to Prashant Parikh.

[22] In private conversation, Dominic Willsdon, formerly of the Tate Modern and presently the director of educational programs at the Museum of Modern Art in San

the gallery-goer attempts to use the critique-of-the-institution framework in order to organize her thinking about the often mysterious avant-garde object before her. Because the audience and the artist share some mutual assumptions about each other's expectations regarding the available range of possible subject matter, they are able to have a conversation. Indeed, since these assumptions have been broadcast so widely internationally, it is readily possible—without much effort—to have transnational "conversations" between artistic senders and receivers who speak different native languages.

Moreover, the artists, presenters, and viewers are not only aware of a number of recurring themes or frameworks, they also share knowledge of a battery of formal devices for advancing those themes, including radical juxtaposition, defamiliarization, and the decontextualization of objects and images from their customary milieus. Though not a syntax and much looser than a grammar, these formal ways of articulating content are, nevertheless, sense-making strategies. The artist knows them and knows that the audience knows them and so the artist uses them in the anticipation that the audience will recognize them and apply them to his work on the basis of its understanding that sense-making strategies like these are quite frequently operating in contemporary art.

These sense-making strategies or associative pathways are shared around the world by the producers and informed consumers of ambitious fine art. They are in large measure what makes the emerging transnational institution of art an internally coherent practice. For this institution is not just a mechanism for moving artworks around the world. Shipping companies can do that. The art works that are delivered from afar must be sent and greeted with shared understandings. In order to achieve that, the emerging transnational artworld has evolved a reliable set of themes and sense-making strategies that can be mobilized in Shanghai, Sydney, Rio, or Capetown.

One such sense-making strategy is pastiche. This may involve the juxtaposition of high and low. But in terms of globalization, the terms of the juxtaposition might be the local and the traditional, on the one hand, versus something of modernizing import, on the other. For example, Mona Hatoun's *Keffea* presents an image of a traditional,

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Francisco, has indicated to me that curators of international shows prefer work from other cultures that evince commitment to critique, thus reinforcing the spread of a converging language game worldwide.

male, Palestinian scarf festooned unexpectedly with the cuttings of women's hair, thereby subversively prompting—through the culturally anomalous opposition—thinking about the sexist repressiveness of Arab society.[23] Informed, cosmopolitan art viewers are on the lookout for tensions like this one in Hartoun's piece and know to take them as progressively inflected openings on a conversation about the dialectical significance of the clashing elements.[24]

Of course, I do not mean to claim that *all* of the themes and sense-making strategies in play in the transnational art world are utterly fixed. Many are. Indeed, enough are so that an intelligible transnational conversation is possible. Furthermore, I do not mean to insinuate that the existence of this transnational institution of art suppresses the expression of the situated interests of artists in their place of origin, since the frameworks I have been considering place a high value on difference, resistance, and critique. The emerging transnational institution of art strives, though perhaps not always successfully, to cultivate a cosmopolitan appreciation of the local within the context of a conversation that is intelligible, due to the preceding factors, to participants in far flung regions around the world.

Though scarcely frictionless and by no means comprehensive with respect to every interest serious artists pursue currently, the transnational art world has put in place a language game replete with conversational presuppositions, hermeneutical gambits, recurring themes, and sense-making strategies. This is a worldwide discursive framework—a serviceable, though far from comprehensive toolkit, if you will, for approaching and deciphering, if not all, then at least a very great deal of ambitious art from all over. Moreover, with these shared conversational presuppositions also comes a shared tradition and history.

In the nineteen eighties, the complaint leveled at MoMA's primitivism and modern art show was that it was ethnocentricity at its most arrogant to hang tribal art next to modernist art simply on the basis

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[23] My interpretation of the Hartoun piece follows that of Homi Bhabha in his talk "Living Together, Growing Apart," at the Multiple Cultures Conference in Mumbai (15 Feb. 2006).

[24] Similar strategies of juxtaposition are in evidence among Chinese artists. Wang Guangyi uses the approach of the propaganda of the Cultural Revolution but inserts capitalist imagery like Marlboro and Coke while Jian Jiwei sculpts stone reliefs in traditional Persian and Buddhist styles but populates them with contemporary characters. (I wish to thank Ales Erjavec for calling these examples to my attention.).

of their superficial, surface similarities. For these were discrete art worlds, even if tribal art sometimes served as an inspiration for modernist artists.

Today, however, when the artworks that derive from nominally different cultures stand side by side they are not necessarily art worlds apart. The works at large scale, international exhibitions generally are playing the same or related language games and share to a great extent the same tradition. When in nineteen ninety-nine two Chinese artists, Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi, urinated into the Tate Modern's version of *Fountain*, they were obviously playing the same extended language game the French performance artist Pierre Pinoncelli was playing in 1993 when he urinated into another version of *Fountain* in Nimes.[25] Whether the Chinese were quoting the Frenchman is unknown. But both gestures were capable of making statements because they were tapping into a common tradition, a tradition whose Dada, of course, was Duchamp. Indeed, the shadow of Duchamp falls in every direction. At the recent Times of India Kala Ghoda Art Festival in Mumbai, there was a piece called *The Loovre* in the series *Urbanization II* by Apnavi Thacker which is an installation which uses a row of four gold and silver painted urinals to open a discussion of the lack of basic amenities in the city.[26]

In the past, the art worlds of different cultures were distinct, segregated in virtue of their diverse traditions of making and meaning, of articulation and interpretation. Even where these distinct traditions touched and cross-feritilized each other, their genealogies and canons stayed separate. What seems to be changing in the present historical moment is that a unified art world with shared language games and traditions appears to be emerging across the globe. Connections between museums, galleries, and large scale exhibitions are becoming more intensive due to the veritable explosion in the means of communication and transportation. But this is more than just a distribution system. It is underwritten by shared presuppositions, sense-making strategies, artistic heritages, as well as a proclivity for the use of certain media. It is rather a common art culture, one whose lineaments require far more study than this preliminary sketch offers.

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[25] Alan Riding, "Conceptual Artist as Vandal: Walk Tall and Carry a Little Hammer (or Ax)," *New York Times: Arts Section* (7 January 2006), p. 1.

[26] See "Return of R. Mutt," *The Times of India* (11 Feb. 2006), p. 4.

Of course, not every art making activity today belongs to this emerging transnational institution of art. There is still folk art, mass art, and various national traditions. But, at the same time, there is this transnational institution of art which connects the artistic practices of urban centers around the world both physically and intellectually. It is not an institution of art in the sense that the philosopher George Dickie had in mind when he coined the term. Its function is not to enfranchise art. Its function is to consolidate a transnational or global artworld—a culturescape with its own language games and networks of communication, distribution, and reception.[27]

[27] I would especially like to thank Susan Feagin, Ales Erjavec, Prashant Parikh, Dominic Willsdon, and Margaret Moore for their help in the preparation of this paper as well as expressing my gratitude to the very responsive and informative audience who attended my lecture at the Mohile Parikh Center for the Visual Arts.

CONCEPT, BODY AND NATURE: AFTER THE END OF ART AND THE REBIRTH OF CHINESE AESTHETICS

Liu Yuedi

In the context of globalization, the end of art is not merely to be attributed to the end of history in general but is to be related to the end of the modern era that was constructed in Europe and America. From an eastern perspective, the problem of the modernity of art has never existed, neither before Euro-American modernity nor outside its geographic bounds. For this reason, the end of art cannot be said to be a global problem. However, were art to come to an end, the aesthetics of everyday life would appear in the wake of its disappearance. Three distinct developments of this aesthetics would be conceptual art, performance art, and land art. That is to say, artworks end up as concepts, return to the body, or return to nature. Accordingly, conceptual aesthetics, somaesthetics, and environmental aesthetics spring up as theoretical attempts to reflect the changes in art since its disappearance as an historical practice.

These new theories correspond, respectively, to the conceptual aesthetics of Chinese Zen Buddhism, the all-around aesthetics of Confucianism, and the naturalist aesthetics of Daoism. Since traditional Chinese aesthetics is by nature a reflection of the art of living (I call it performing life aesthetics), new conclusions might be reached by taking these traditional Chinese aesthetics as frames of reference in our effort to rethink the issue of the end of art. As globalization continues to expand in the second millennium, the debate over the end of art heats up in such an explosive context.[1] However, from a broader non-western perspective, especially from that of Chinese culture, is it justified to say that art on a global basis is coming to its end?

Globalization and five faces of the end of art is the subject of Part One; an eastern perspective on the end of modernity and of art, of Part

[1] See Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Volume 8, 2004. The theme of the 2004 yearbook *Aesthetics and/as Globalization* mainly explores the challenge posed by globalization to aesthetics and art. I have translated the compiled articles into Chinese.

Two; and conceptual, performance, and land art, of Parts Three through Five.

Part One: Globalization and five faces of the end of art

Will art come to its end on a global basis or has it not yet seen symptoms of its ending? As early the late 1970s, the French aesthetician Mikel Dufrenne, observing the worldwide diffusion of art, asked "does art become international when it is distributed all over the world?"[2]

Since the idea of the end of art emerged from within contemporary Euro-American culture, following in the footsteps of globalization and its rapid involvement with what is happening in non-western cultures, this internally powered and involuntary end will go through a series of historical modifications. Presumably, forces from non-western culture will drive the transformations, and there will, then, be two ways to view the end of art: the Euro-American-centric one that emerged from Euro-American post-modernity and the one evoked by the western one in other parts of the world, especially in northeast Asia, South America and North Africa. Three models of globalization suggest themselves: the second and third models are in fact not firmly grounded.

Model 1: The conception of the end of art was initially proposed in Euro-American culture and has exerted influence upon many places across the world. Owing to the diversity of the differing cultural contexts in which this idea has had influence, the idea itself has been greatly enriched by going through a process of local variation. Model 2: It was proposed at about the same time in Europe/America and other parts of the world, possibly in just a few regions. However, because of the diversity of the cultures in which it appeared and the tendency of the idea to acculturate—take on characteristics of its home culture—diverse senses of 'the end of art' emerge. Model 3: Along with the force of the globalization of Euro-American culture, senses of 'the end of art' tend to become identical worldwide and globalization tends to be reduced to the homogenization of arts and cultures. The three possibilities are, first, that the idea of the end of art has been enriched by its dissemination across the globe; second, that

[2] Mikel Dufrenne (ed.), *Main Trends in Aesthetics and the Science of Art*, New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979, p. 8.

it has been splintered into close, but different, ideas by the dissemination; and, third, that it has remained resolutely Euro-American.

If we acknowledge that cultures are historically different and that the concept of the end of art was originally the fruit of Euro-American post-modernity, model 2 should be taken as a groundless supposition. If we deny that globalization tends to make world cultures exactly the same and maintain instead that globalization is committed to establishing symbiotic relationships among multiple cultures, model 3 will never be realized.[3] The idea of the end of art was introduced in 1984 by the American philosopher Arthur Danto and the German art historian Hans Belting. The idea spread throughout the west and later out to the whole world, where it was modified by local cultures as it became part of their cultural connotations.

In my book *After the End of Art: An Aesthetic Rethinking of Art's Duration* (2006),[4] I concluded that the end of art involves five dimensions: first, the end of art (Arthur C. Danto); second, the end of art history (Hans Beltung); third, the end of artists (Roland Barthes and Joseph Beuys); fourth, the end of the aesthetic attitude and aesthetic experience (Geroge Dickie and Richard Shusterman); and, fifth, the end of aesthetics and art theory (Victor Burgin and Arnold Berleant).

The end of art	Arthur C. Danto	The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art	1984
		The End of Art	1984
The end of art history	Hans Belting	*Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte*	1984
The end of artists	Roland Barthes	La mort de l'auteur	1968
	Joseph Beuys	everyone is an artist	–

[3] In fact, according to value theory, a healthy or ideal paradigm of globalization is expected to contain two interactive processes. The cultural re-orientation that prepares the world for national cultures includes, on the one hand, the indigenization of global value and, on the other hand, the globalization of local knowledge.

[4] See Liu Yuedi, *After the End of Art: An Aesthetic Rethinking of Art's Durationv,* Nanjing: Nanjing Press, 2006, Chapter 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Also see Liu Yuedi, *The History of Visual Aesthetics: From Premodern, Modern to Postmodern*, Jinan: Shandong Publishing House of Literature and Art, 2008, chapter 6.

The end of aesthetic experience	George Dickie	The myth of the aesthetic attitude	1964
	Richard Shusterman	The End of Aesthetic Experience	1997
The end of aesthetics and art theory	Victor Burgin	*The End of Art Theory*	1986
	Arnold Berleant	*Art and Engagement*	1991

Part Two: The end of modernity and the end of art from an eastern perspective

What modern European culture gave birth to is none other than philosophical aesthetics and the idea of the autonomy of art. However, these two notions are simply imported ideas for non-western areas, whether for ancient eastern cultures, native cultures of each continent, or even African or native American cultures.

Ancient eastern cultures can find no parallels either in original European art or in its later developments. Ancient eastern thinking never attempted to narrow down art as fine art; instead, art was incorporated into craftwork as an integral form. This attitude was very popular among most eastern countries in ancient times. Some places went even so far as to consider art at most a form of the techniques of greater practical use. Not surprisingly, when the artifacts of the primitive African cultures that exerted great influence on Gauguin and Picasso are re-interpreted in their original background, they instantly lose the connotation as aesthetic objects that they have on a modern European reading. As a matter of fact, the attribution of 'art' to these items is merely an outcome of the reflection on and misinterpretation of African culture made by their European counterparts who looked through distorting glasses.

The end of art arose as a necessary consequence of the three stages of modernity: pre-modernity, modernity and post-modernity. That is, the progress from pre- to post-modernity was finished and so, then, was art. Thanks to this dialectal maturity within Euro-America culture, the idea of the end of art can be put into the context of postmodernism for fuller and more fruitful scrutiny. In contrast to the situation in Europe, art as such did not originally exist in most countries. The artifacts the Europeans would call art after the eighteenth century fell

under the more inclusive category of intentional objects, while the artifacts that bore the borrowed word 'art' would go through a process of self-perfection after the word was introduced into the non-European countries.[5] For the cultures in East Asia, North Africa and South America, not to mention the late rising or still developing cultures, art is still on the way to its perfection, starting as it did from different stages.

China is no exception because, remarkably, so-called contemporary Chinese culture embraces all of these: its traditional art as the continuity of its classic culture; the European classicism and impressionism that was introduced in the early 20th century; the modernism that flourished in the 1980s after having being introduced in the early 20th century; and the various arts of postmodernity that were imported since the 1990s. This has given rise to miscellaneous discourses, with arts at different historical stages engaged in synchronous games and dialogues within the same cultural forum. Among the things that distinguish contemporary Chinese culture from its Euro-American counterpart is an internal tension between staying national and keeping abreast of the times, a tension that puts pressure on the framework of its culture and art.

Thus we come to the conclusion that the idea of the end of art is mostly a reflection of what is going on in Euro-American art and aesthetics and, therefore, cannot claim global universality. The same problem does not necessarily concern all cultures, which are historically different. The fanciful assertion that the end of art is occurring globally is merely a worldwide idol of the theatre. Therefore, the idea of the end of art is hardly part of globalization.

Even so, with regard to the end of art, we will not take sides with the contemporary aesthetician Joseph Margolis, who claimed that "there is no end of art, because there is no end to human existence; it is immensely open" and "there cannot be an end to art just as there cannot be an end to philosophy or to human history."[6] But, as Richard Shusterman argues: "The argument for art's end then invokes the

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[5] If we put Arthur C. Danto's theory about intentional objects (Cf. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) in a trans-cultural context, we can understand all kinds of art and non-art among non-western cultures very well.

[6] Joseph Margolis, "The Endless Future of Art", in *The End of Art and Beyond: Essays after Danto*, edited by Arto Haapala, Jerrold Levinson and Veikko Rantala, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, pp. 15, 22.

recent shift toward postmodernity. If we have made the postmodern turn, as the challenging of the modernist notion of art's autonomy and progress would suggest, and if art is essentially a historical product of modernity, then art should reach its end with the end of modernity, since modernity constitutes its generative base and structure. The pangs and throes of this end are witnessed in the series of convulsive crises that mark art's recent history and in its increasing loss of power, faith and direction."[7]

We want to add that the end of art is not to be understood against the background of the end of history; it is more specifically and immediately related to the end of the history of modernity. Therefore, the idea of art, as part of modern enlightenment in Europe, is likely to come to its end along with the end of modernity.

After all, neither before Euro-American modernity nor outside Europe and America has there ever been the problem of the appearance of an art of a modern bearing. More specifically, neither before the European notion of art as fine art was born nor before an artistic perspective traveled to the cultural spaces outside European culture was art ever what it has later become. Or to put it in another way, the Europe-dominated history of modernity never saw the birth of art as such before or outside itself.

That is to say, before the age of Enlightenment a general idea of art as fine art still loomed in the distance. Outside its European habitat the alien idea was at most something imported that lacked a local parallel. If the span of western art is stretched to cover the pre-modern period, the extension must be the result of self-reflection via the posterior concept of artistic vision. Likewise, what has been unearthed in Asian, African, and Latin American arts will be seen by the Euro-American as a reflection of the other.

Undoubtedly, the birth and growth of art is still a global concern although the beginning of the end of art does not coincide in various cultures throughout the world. What we are concerned with here is whether the various arts that are on their way to the end will reach the finishing line at the same time. We believe that a more reasonable hypothesis is that since arts worldwide arose at different times, they will reach their ends at different times.

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[7] Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live Alternatives for the Ends of Art*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 3.

	The Roads of Arts	Directions	Aesthetics after end	Chinese wisdom
Art ends in concept	Conceptual Art	Making concept become art	Conceptualism aesthetics	Conceptualism aesthetics of Chinese Zen Buddhism
Art returns to body	Performance art, Happenings, Body art	Making human behavior become art	Somaesthetics (aesthetics through body)	All-around aesthetics of Confucianism
Art returns to nature	Land art (i..e. Earth Art or Earthworks)	Making nature become artwork	Natural and environmental aesthetics	Naturalism aesthetics of Daoism

Part Three: Aesthetics of everyday life: after the end of art

First, art is bound to end, possibly on the same day that history ends. Whatever the case, on its way to the end art has to travel by routes different from those it has traveled so far. Conceptual art, performance art, land art and those art forms to be born in the future are some of those roads all of which lead to Rome.

Second, symptoms of an ending have been spotted from time to time in art, but from a more traditional perspective the ending or decay has turned art into non-art or even anti-art. The once main blind spots in traditional art—concepts and human bodies themselves and nature itself, not representations or expressions of them—now afford an answer to where art will ultimately end as concepts, human bodies, and nature work through the constraints in the development of art.

I believe that at least three answers to the question about where art will end can be justified. First, art ends in concepts. This indicates the road taken by conceptual art: concepts drive out the form that was at the core of traditional art in order to become the heart and driving force of art. Second, art returns to body. This is the road taken by performance art, happenings, and body art, making art once again inseparable from the human body as it was in the Stone Age. Somaesthetics, aesthetics through and of the body, follows body art as

a theoretical response. Third, art returns to nature. Land artists make art directly out of the land itself; their ultimate goal is to do away with the rigid alienation between art and nature and to encourage a dialogue between the two in order to realize the ideals of natural art and artistic nature, in other words, to celebrate the naturalness of art and the artistry of nature.

The above three directions art has taken reflect, respectively, the beliefs that concepts can become art, human behavior can become art, and nature can become a work of art. However, if we attempt to sum up their artistic orientation, we find that the three roads will converge at the idea of the oneness of art and life. This means that art finally returns to everyday life, with art becoming life itself and life becoming artistic.

Thus, what unfolds itself on the horizon is the newborn and vigorous aesthetics of performing life. As we know, traditional Chinese aesthetics is the thinking about and theorizing the art of living, and I called it performing life aesthetics.[8] I hope that from its perspective we may be able to study what aesthetic commitments the three artistic developments will be bound up with and to determine the real road art will travel to everyday life.

Part Four: Art ends in concepts: conceptual art and the aesthetics of Chinese Zen Buddhism

Conceptual art represents a new road that art has taken in the direction of art ending in concepts. The American conceptual artist and theorist Joseph Kosuth once said that "a work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention," that is, he is saying that a particular work of art is art, which means that it is a definition of art.[9] Kosuth justified his argument by comparing works of art to propositions of analytical philosophy. Generally, the core of linguistics-

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[8] Liu Yuedi, *Performing Life Aesthetics: Critical Modernity and Reconstruction of Aesthetics,* Hefei: Anhui Educational Publishing House, 2005, pp. 175~233. This book takes phenomenological, pragmatic, and Chinese philosophical approaches and comes to the conclusion that aesthetics takes its earthly roots in everyday life while on the other hand it also draws on extra-everyday life as its source of tension. Also see Liu Yuedi, *Living Aesthetics and Art Experience*, Nanjing: Nanjing Press, 2007.

[9] Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy", in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, Cambridge/ Massachusetts/ London: the MIT Press, 1999, p. 165.

directed conceptual art is that the idea of art and "art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification."[10]

If we seek to widen our view by turning to eastern philosophy, a new revelation about conceptual art will come into view.[11] Known as localized Buddhism, Chinese Zen or the Intuitive School does not set up scriptures. It lays stress on meditation and intuition rather than on books and other external aids and reaches into the human heart for enlightenment. In comparison with most schools of Buddhism that rely on the language in scriptures for their religious practice, "Zen might well be the only religious philosophy full of multiple as well as ambiguous meanings because it relies heavily on visual revelation and poetic inspiration."[12] It is this visual dimension that relates some of the ideas in Zen to conceptual art.

Apparently, what the conceptual artist resorts to is actually an anti-Zen experience. The Zen experience eschews language, while language is indispensable in the artistic experience of conceptual art, for any philosophical thinking has to be done via language. At the same time, this anti-Zen experience is found to embed factors that contribute to our identification of conceptual art with Zen. After all, according to conceptual art an idea can be described through the unique language of art, and the formless language of art has been paired with the lingual amorphism of Zen. Neither conceptual art nor Zen Buddhism defers to the authority of the word.

On the other hand, whether or not Zen encourages thinking or non-thinking also matters. It is recorded that when the Qingyuan School (Tang Dynasty 618–907 AD) Zen Buddhist Yűeh shan (i.e. Yakusan) was sitting in meditation, a monk asked: what are you thinking while sitting immovably? The master said: I am thinking of the very matter of not-thinking. To this the monk asked: How do you think of the matter of not-thinking? The master replied: Non-thinking! On the same grounds, another Zen Buddhist named Yakusan also

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[10] Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy", in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, Cambridge / Massachusetts/ London: the MIT Press, 1999, p. 166.

[11] See Curtis L. Carter, "Conceptual Art: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?" in *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Volume 8, 2004, p. 16; Liu Yuedi, *After the End of Art: The Duration of Art as an Aesthetic Rethinking*, Nanjing: Nanjing Press, 2006, pp. 328-342.

[12] Wai-lim Yip, *The Daoist Aesthetics and Western Culture*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2002, p. 166.

maintained that Zen does not establish itself on the basis of either thinking or not-thinking, but rather non-thinking, which is beyond both thinking and not-thinking.

The philosophic tone of the dialogue suggests that the anti-language Zen bears something in common with pro-language conceptual art. Although Zen can do without language, it cannot reach the human heart if disarmed of language. Although conceptual art is armed with language, it has to give it up in order to arrive at an intuition of a concept. It is between language and non-language that conceptual art and Zen recognize each other.

From language to non-language, or in the jargon of conceptual art, from formal to formless language, thinking transcends itself to become non-thinking. This is what Zen explicates: "the unspeakable has to be outspoken; the inexpressible has to be communicated. It does not allow itself to fall prey to speculation, rationality, and language, but it has to express and communicate what it implies."[13] Similarly, the conceptual artist Ian Wilson said that what the "formless abstraction of language" presents is "infinite and formless;" that is, "what is presented is neither known nor unknown."[14]

If we take a closer look, we find that conceptual art also resorts to the Zen-like way of experience, with Zen awakening as its principle. The conceptual awakening cannot be realized without language as its ladder, but it transcends reliance on the medium when it achieves the aims of conceptual art. Chinese thinkers said that to experience a Zen awakening was to perceive the meaning and forget the words or to catch fish and discard the fishing tool.

For conceptual art and its aesthetics, concepts are involved in our everyday life. Zen also engages itself with everyday life. "Everyday thought is composed of both concepts and the relationship of concepts to the external world. There is a clear distinction between the two. Conceptual art makes this distinction."[15] Although concepts are clearly involved with everyday life, "conceptual art is concerned with the

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[13] Li Zehou, *On Chinese Ancient Thoughts History*, Hefei: Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, 1994, p. 202.

[14] Ian Wilson, "Conceptual Art", in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, Cambridge/ Massachusetts/ London: the MIT Press, 1999, p. 417.

[15] Ian Wilson, "Conceptual Art", in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, Cambridge/ Massachusetts/ London: the MIT Press, 1999, p. 416.

internal, intellectual nature of a concept. The more removed from external references, the stronger the concept. The nature of concepts is antithetical to sensual reality. Conceptual art, when it is taken seriously, separates consciousness from the exterior world."[16] Conceptual art attempts the surpassing of everyday life, and Zen awakening does the same.

Part Five: Art returns to body: performance art and Confucianism's aesthetics

Performance art, happenings, body art, and action art have chosen another road of artistic development. Performance art combines the human body, action, color, light, and sound, all of which together make up a micro-environment. That is why performance art has been regarded as a synthetic art. However, the basic environment of performance art is a macro-environment.

Since performance art draws on key elements of various artistic trends, its own aesthetic value remains a question to be explored. Through analysis, we begin with the four key constituents of this art: environment, body, action, and happenings. In the art system that revolves around the artwork, the body and its actions are reduced to being no more than initial factors that contribute to what follows from and completes them to make the final work. The body produces the action and then the action produces the artwork: formerly this was believed to be an irreversible chain reaction from body to action to work.

Performance art as a more mature form of contemporary art reconstructs the outdated art system, not only breaking apart the chain reaction, but also building up the *samsara* where body, action, environment, and happenings causally determine each other. For example, if we start with body, the first mutual interaction will take place between body and action. Performance art never treats the body as static; it is believed immediately to set off action. Body and action are, then, fundamentally the same thing.

The next determination in the sequence arises between the environment and the body: the environment gives shape to the body while the

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[16] Ian Wilson, "Conceptual Art", in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, Cambridge/ Massachusetts/ London: the MIT Press, 1999, p. 416.

body itself and its actions in turn change the environment for performer and participator alike. According to John Dewey, what we call experience results from the mutual interaction between an organism and its environment. Similarly, the experience with performance art comes from the interplay of the body and the environment; for performance art aims at "the primitive relationship a living being" used to have with its surroundings.[17] In addition, the interplay can hardly cover up the multiplicity of experiences. In fact, the relationship between the body and its surroundings attempts to renew the natural link of art to "the very process of living."[18] Performance art can therefore be regarded as the artistic externalization of Dewey's idea of art as experience.

When the body is immediately related to its surroundings, the surroundings are more closely related to the happenings (to what is happening) that result from partnership of the body and its surround. The environment as external to action and the happening as internal to action were once considered to be separate. However, the reverse is the truth. "Fundamentally, Environments and Happenings are similar. They are the passive and active sides of a single coin, whose principle is extension. Thus an Environment is not less than a Happening."[19] This interactive relationship is inherent in performance art, with "the performance of a Happening taking place over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing locales." "Time, which follows closely on space consideration, should be variable and discontinuous." "All the elements—people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time—can in this way be integrated."[20].

Performance art also goes so far as to maintain that artistic activity is comprehensively aesthetic insofar as it involves the body and the language of the body. This can be compared with the tradition of the oneness of poetry, music. and dance that can be dated back to as early as primitive Chinese culture, when the less cultivated man did not

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[17] John Dewey, *Art as Experience,* New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934, p. 29.

[18] John Dewey, *Art as Experience,* New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934, p. 28.

[19] Allan Kaprow, "Assemblage, Environment and Happenings", in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 719.

[20] Allan Kaprow, "Assemblage, Environment and Happenings", in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 720, 720, 722, respectively.

separate the activity of his eyes, ears, nose, mouth, arms, legs. and torso. Confucian aesthetics picked up this tradition and elaborated it in the preface of *Annotations of Mao Poetry* (Han Dynasty 206 BC—220 AD), which claims that "the affections (*qing*) are stirred within and take on form (*xing*) in words (*yan*). If words alone are inadequate, we speak them out in sighs. If sighing is inadequate, we sing them. If singing them is inadequate, unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them."[21] In this kind of peak experience of dancing, poetry, music, and dance (lyrics, score, and bodily performance) become one, and *yue* (music) incorporates poetry, song, dance, and visual arts (costumes, stage settings), the combination of which is accompanied by their aesthetic accord.

The so-called oneness of *he* (harmony) and *yue* (music) in Chinese traditional aesthetics refers to the harmonious whole that can find its parallel in Richard Wagner's idea of a total work of art or a complete artwork (Gesamtkunstwerk). However, the synthesis is only possible with the body of a primitive man, who is simultaneously the producer of sound, the performer of body movement, and the maker of music. In this sense, contemporary performance art can be compared to a re-living of the primitive wizardry. In this back-to-body art, the body becomes the language of art and in its motions integrates various artistic forms.

In a sense, the body performance art that a large number of Euro-American artists began to practice beginning in the 1960s reflects their attempts to return to primitive art. The prevailing view is that the body is being used as an art language.[22] When art returns to the body, artists are allowed to use the bodies as material for expression rather than as an object of interpretation and representation by materials. When the body is the material for expression, it serves as the actor, the material of the artwork, and the fundamental tool for artistic expression. Finally, the body is elevated as the core of happenings, body art, and performance art. Only in such a context can we make sense of the idea that "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible."[23]

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[21] Qtd. in Stephen Owen, *Anthology of Chinese Literature Beginning to 1911*, New York: Norton, 1996, p. 65.

[22] See Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*, Milan: Skira International Corporation, 2000.

[23] Allan Kaprow, "Assemblage, Environment and Happenings", in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 720.

A bold claim is that art can be interpreted as originally having been a performing act or a performance. This newly proposed idea by a contemporary scholar is actually a remarkable characteristic of primitive culture. David Davies finally "defined 'art' as performance" thereby to determine "the values of art."[24] He claimed that artworks are the performances by artists rather than objects they made. This draws attention to eastern aesthetic value.

Why is somaesthetics as a branch of study important?[25] It is because it integrates body and soul, and we feel through bodily sensation, which, like perception, is related to soul. This insight comes from Asian philosophy. Unlike its western counterparts, which study body and soul in two rigidly separate departments, philosophy and psychology, Chinese philosophy and aesthetics insist that what happens between the two is a "psychosomatic merge."[26] That is why we believe that in their joint efforts to develop somaesthetics Chinese aesthetics has a greater theoretical potential than western aesthetics.

Part Six: Art returns to nature: land art and Daoism's aesthetics

In the era of globalization, the aesthetics of nature or environmental aesthetics is becoming a new focus in aesthetic and artistic domains. In light of this new approach, European and American aestheticians are realizing a rupture with the traditions of analytic aesthetics, which centered upon art as its object of study. The Chinese counterparts of analytic aesthetics are also making efforts to re-examine and unearth aesthetic elements from traditional culture. When nature has become the kernel in a concurrent rebuilding of an aesthetic system, it is presumably because aesthetics on a global basis is shifting its focus.

In fact, long before aesthetics returned to nature, land art (earth art or earthworks) as an extension of environmental art encouraged the rethinking of nature in terms of its aesthetic dimension.[27] Land art,

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[24] David Davies, *Art as Performance*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004, pp. 236-265.

[25] Cf. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, chapter 10 and "Somaesthetics and The Second Sex", *Hypatia* 18 (2003), 106-136.

[26] Roger T. Ames, "The Meaning of Body in Chinese Traditional Philosophy", in *World Philosophy*, 2006 (5), pp. 50, 60.

[27] The three terms, land art, earth art, and earthworks, are not usually clearly differentiated (*Oxford Dictionary of 20th-Century Art*, edited by Ian Chilvers, Oxford

one of the important movements of European and American contemporary art, distinguishes itself with its use of raw materials such as earth, rock, soil, and so on.

To sum up, with the return to nature as its keynote, land art is thought to have come "during a period of ecological debate on respect for the earth, the danger of pollution and the excesses of consumerism"[28] and to have become an aesthetic current that resists the trend of industrialization and urbanization.

However, the role of land art in a mature aesthetics of nature has long been neglected both in the west and the east. The probable reason is that while land art attempts to explore the aesthetic appreciation of nature through art, the aesthetics of nature has been going the other way round and trying to free itself from the hegemony of art. In fact, the practice of land art can be expected to encourage an in-depth reconsideration of the aesthetics of nature in its many dimensions. For example, the aesthetics of nature can hear its echoes in Chinese Daoist thought, which believed that the *Dao* follows the way of spontaneity (*Dao* fa zi ran).

The return to nature is the primary aesthetic characteristic of land art, which wants to undermine the opposition between the two poles of art and nature, their mutual ostracism found, for example, in Pablo Picasso's saying that "art is no presence in nature."[29] With land art, however, artistic creation and appreciation are both oriented toward all there is between heaven (*Tian*) and earth (*Di*). Art's attention to nature appeared later in the European tradition than it did in the traditional culture of China. Pure landscape painting emerged in Holland in the 17th century. Nature by itself will not become the object of European artists' attention until Europe focuses on ecology and the environment. Holland had to become conscious of its environment because of its geography. There was so much water throughout the country that a lot of water had to be filled in to make more land. Holland, therefore, was conscious of its environment before it introduced landscape paintings into western art.

University Press, 1999, p. 335), but they are translated in Chinese respectively: Dijing art (*Dijing yishu*), Dadi art (*Dadi yishu*) and Dadi works (*Dadi zuopin*).

[28] Jane Turner (ed.), *From Expressionism to Post-Modernism: Styles and Movement in 20th-century Western Art*, London: Macmillan Reference Limited, 2000, pp. 231~233.

[29] April Kingsley, "Critique and Foresee", *Art News*, 1971, No.3, p. 52.

At first, the scenery in European classical oil painting was present as the background against which people were placed. Although scenery later moved into the foreground, the presence of a viewer who gazed at the landscape was always presupposed. We might call this an aesthetics of subjectivity because in the art that it studied, a human subject was always either within the picture's frame or before the picture as its viewer and witness. The aesthetics of nature, on the other hand, would be anti-subjective in so far as it transforms art from a pure ornament of culture into another form in the vast space between heaven and earth.

The relation between heaven, man, and earth is rethought through the aesthetics of nature, which constructs a new human being and a new human value: one in which human beings are not discordant with heaven and earth but instead conform to the rule of nature. The status of human being in European art rose higher and higher after the Renaissance. In the aesthetics of nature, however, man is no longer figured as a subject. That is to say, a human being is not seen as an ego that wants to reconstruct nature, but as one who continues to be harmonious with nature. In the European tradition, man is more important than nature. Even though humans' power goes deep into nature, they are never the dominators of heaven and earth. Indeed, they are at best partial participators in nature. A kind of concordant relationship is maintained between man, heaven, and earth.

In conclusion, the framework of natural aesthetics consists of basic triplicity between heaven, man, and earth. How man participates in heaven and earth is not by encroaching on nature, but by being part of the harmonious relations between man and heaven, man and earth, heaven and earth.

Land art can be considered the apotheosis of the environmental paradigm because it is through land art that nature is allowed to be as it is.[30] Nature is no more an ornament nor is it scenery. Nature is neither the visualization of art qualities nor the focus in landscape. Land art is trying to let nature be. The minor changes in nature that land art

[30] Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and Natural Environment", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.37 (Spring, 1979). Allen Carlson uses science as a basic source of knowledge (such as knowledge about nature from natural history or from commonsense or folk predecessors) in the environmental paradigm, but actually the third paradigm does not always rely on natural knowledge, and natural feeling is more important too. In this manner, Chinese traditional paradigm of appreciation of nature becomes another model in the environmental paradigm instead.

makes are devoted to the contemplation of nature rather than of art, to the contemplation of nature intact with only natural changes rather than of a nature modified by art.

According to land art, only nature is the ultimate origin of everything, including artifacts. For that matter, man must preserve the natural ecosystem of nature and fight against any attempt to reconstruct a second nature factitiously conceived. This conception is similar to what Chuang Tzu (Daoist philosopher in third or forth century BC China) said: "And the true Sage, talking his stand upon the beauty of the universe (*yuan tian di zhi mei*), pierces the principles of created things."[31] In this sense, land art is the art that revives the beauty of heaven and earth, for in it nature cannot be changed harshly and made merely to appear through art. The relation among artworks, artifacts, and natural objects is rethought in this way by land art and the aesthetics of nature.

The aesthetics of nature is related to the Chinese traditional Daoist thought that the unity of heaven-earth (*Tian* and *di*) has great beauty. Chuang-tzu said: "The universe is very beautiful, yet it says nothing. The four seasons abide by a fixed law, yet they are not heard. All creation is based upon absolute principle, yet nothing speaks."[32] He shows his respect for nature between *Tian* and *Di*. The respect, not reverence accompanied by profound awe, comes from a man-nature familiarity that presupposes the adjustment of one to the other. In the Daoist perspective, nature has both its inexhaustible potential power and its spontaneous natural working without end. Therefore natural aesthetics is very close to oriental wisdom: artists admit that there is a greatest beauty existing in the world and that "the wholeness under the heaven can't compare in beauty with the greatest beauty itself."[33]

Thus, it can be seen that land art is making a new start. On the one hand, it is fighting against the European traditions of artistic creation by releasing art from the easel, frame, and entablement in order to go back to nature. The end of art is then sought in the interlocution between man and nature. On the other hand, land art is fighting against the excessive interpretation of nature from the perspective of

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[31] *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, translated by Herbert A. Giles, Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd, 1926, p. 279.

[32] *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, translated by Herbert A. Giles, Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd, 1926, p. 279.

[33] Kuo Qingfan ed., *Collected Notes on Chuang Tzu*, in *Collected Works of Zhuzi*, Volume 3, Shanghai: Shanghai Publishing House, 1990, p. 82.

the human subject and trying to bring about the end of the reduction of nature to scenery.

Part Seven: Postscript

The contemporary art of the latter half of the twentieth century in the west shows that modern art has come to an end and that art has re-emerged as conceptual art, performance act, and land art. Therefore, art no longer inhabits the self-enclosed autonomous sphere modernity presumed it to inhabit. Art has gone outside of this sphere to concepts, the activities of the human body, and nature. We can call this the art of everyday life. The aesthetics of everyday life may become the mainstream. When art returns to the womb of life, it promises to bridge the gap between western and eastern cultures and their aesthetics and to promote the birth of the art of the performance of life.

INDEX

Abramovic, Marina, 182
Adams, Laurie, xxvii
Adorno, Theodor, 59
Ai Weiwei, 8, 17, 40, 236
Alberti, Leon Battista, 373
Ames, Roger, 158-160, 168, 258, 406
Andrews, Julia F., 305, 307, 309, 310, 314, 369
Aristotle, xxv, xxvi, 192, 195, 208, 224, 355
Arnheim, Rudolf, 92, 93, 216, 218-220, 243, 244

Bada Shan Ren (Pa-ta-shan-jen), 299
Baer, Joan, 372
Bai Yiluo, 57
Bao Shicheng, 94
Barboza David, 313
Barmé, Geremie R., 314, 315
Barthes, Roland, 88, 395
Baudelaire, Charles, 44, 296
Baudrillard, Jean, 54
Bauman, Zygmunt, 68
Baxandall, Michael, 356, 359
Beardsley, Monroe, 216, 217, 220
Beauvoir, Simone De, 147, 151, 152, 154-157
Bellini, Gentile, 380
Beltung, Hans, 375, 395
Benjamin West, 359
Berger, John, 183
Berleant, Arnold, 247, 254-256, 265, 395, 396
Beuys, Joseph, 100, 105, 177, 178, 184, 185, 395
Bhabha, Homi, 350, 351, 389
Bin Laden 120
Binyon, Laurence, 191, 195, 198,202, 204, 209, 210
Bloom, Harold, 35
Blythe, R. H., 199
Bonnard, Pierre, 238
Boucher, Francois, 194
Brancusi, Constantin, 46, 47
Brand, Peg, 25, 270, 372
Braque, Georges, 366
Brecht, Bertolt, 381, 382
Breton, Andre, 305
Brodsky, Joyce, 304
Bryson, Norman, 7, 8, 10-12, 14, 20, 93, 216
Buber, Martin, 205
Burger, Peter, 296
Burgin, Victor, 395, 396
Bush, George W., 119
Bush, Susan, 251, 252
Bu Yantu, 279

Cage, John, 318
Cahill, James, 197
Cai Guo-Qiang, xxi, xxvii, xxix, 8, 14, 15, 40, 42-46, 81
Cai Jing, 95
Cai Weidong, 55
Cai Xiang, 95
Cai Yuanpei, 70
Cao Minglu, 9, 13
Carter, Holland, 308
Carlson,Allan, 256, 408
Carrier, David, xxvii
Carroll, Noel, 235
Carter, Curtis L., xxvii, xxviii, 66, 85, 86, 271
Cary, Joyce, 362
Cezanne, Paul, 45, 224, 265, 305, 356, 381
Chan Yuk-keung, 384
Chang Da-Chien, 370, 371
Chang Seng-yu, 208
Chang Tsong-Zung, 111
Chang Yen-yuan, 221-223, 225, 237
Che Guevara, 120
Chen Chieh-Jen, 383
Chen Duxin, 300
Chen Lingyang, 18, 19, 138-144, 145, 147, 148, 162-167
Chen Shuxia, 33
Chen Shuren, 301
Chen Tinghou, 371
Chen Weiqun, 57
Chen Wen, 106
Chen Yaotian, 94
Chen Yanning, 308

Chen Yifan, 306
Chen Yifei, 40
Chen Zhuo, 54
Cheng Hao, 157
Chenyang Li, 153, 160
Chiang Ching-Kuo, 327, 329, 332
Chiang Kai-Shek, 322-324,, 327, 329, 331, 332
Chiang Wei-Shui, 321
Chiang Yee, 194 – 196, 201, 207, 257
Chicago, Judy, 71, 136, 161, 162, 166, 167
Chi Peng, 54
Chiu, Melissa, 42, 44, 138
Christo, 42
Chodorow, Nancy, 159
Chuan Xu, Judith, 168
Chuang Chu, 325
Chuang Tzu, 204, 205, 250, 253, 409
Chung-Li Kao, 384, 385
Chu, Christina, 302
Chu Ta (Pa-tashan-jen), 299
Ciano, Count, 193
Clark, Kenneth, 183
Clarke, David, xxviii, 214, 229-233, 238
Clinton, Bill, 119
Close, Chuck, 38, 205
Clunas, Craig, 35, 36, 39, 40, 114, 302
Coleman, E.J., 248, 249
Coleridge, 208
Colville, Alex, 22
Condee, Nancy, 375
Confucius, 110, 160, 168, 195, 197, 204, 223
Constable, John, 340
Cotter, Holland, 308, 312
Courbet, Gustave, 131, 317
Croce, Benedetto, 206
Cui Xiuwen, 141, 142

Danto, Arthur C., xxv, xxvi, 65, 71-73, 224, 271, 281, 353, 369, 395, 397
Daumier, Honore, 196
David, Jacques-Louis, 358
Davies, David, 406
Davies, Stephen, 73, 215, 271
De Beauvoir, 147, 154-158
De Maria, Walter, 15, 355
Degas, Edgar, 355
Delacroix, Eugene, 51, 317
Deleuze, Gilles, 56
De Silva, Anil, 198
Deng Xiaoping, xix, 6, 25, 38,113, 126, 173, 176, 185, 329
Derain, Andre, 305, 363
Derrida, Jacques, 154
Descartes, Rene, 132, 194, 254
Dewey, John, 192, 309, 404
Dickie, George, 253, 391, 395, 396
Dix, Otto, 118, 120
Dong Zhiying, 113
Dubuffet, Jean, 45
Duchamp, Marcel, 45, 309, 372, 390
Dufrenne, Mikel, 394
Dupont, Pierre, 296
Durer, Albrecht, 118
Dutton, Dennis, 271

Eagleton, Mary, 147
Eagleton, Terry, 73, 147
Eliot, T. S., 220, 245, 353
Elkins, James, 375
Engels, Friedrich, 155
Enwezor, Okwui, 375, 387
Erickson, Britta, 117, 308
Everest, Sir George, 238

Fan Di'an, 371
Fang Lijun, 24-27, 29, 31, 32, 69, 238
Feng Boyi, 40
Feng Mengbo, 312
Fenollosa, Ernst F., 196
Ferrara, Costanzo da, 380
Fetherstone, Mike, 65
Foster, Hal, 295, 296, 375
Foucault, Michel, 154, 179, 182, 234
Fragonard, Jean-Honore, 360
Frank, Elizabeth, 65
Freud, Lucian, 118
Freud, Sigmund, xxv, 45, 155, 225
Fried, Michael, 375
Friedan, Betty, 147
Friedman, Thomas, xxvi
Friedrich, Caspar David, 118
Fry, Roger, 91
Fu Baoshi, 37
Fung Yu-Lan, 110
Fu Shan, 96

Galikowski, Maria, 306
Gao Jianfu, 114, 301-303
Gao Jianping, 248, 249, 251, 256-258, 266, 271, 300
Gao Minglu, 40, 69, 180, 181, 300, 310, 314
Gao Qiang, 370,-372

Gao Qifeng, 301
Gao Zhen, 370-372
Gardner, Howard, 93, 141
Gatens,Moira, 175
Gauguin, Paul, 194, 363, 365, 396
Gernet, Jaques, 89
Gerth, H.H., 70
Gibbon, Edward, 364
Gilmartin, Christina K. 152, 153
Gilot, Francoise, 366
Giorgione, 198
Giotto, 47, 358
Gombrich, Erst, 317, 366, 373
Goodman, Nelson, 87, 88, 278, 279
Goya, Francisco, 120, 196, 208
Graham, A. C., 158
Granthram, Governor, 339
Greenberg, Clement, 295, 375
Groys, Boris, 297
Gu Wenda , 81, 311, 312
Guan Shanyue, 37
Guan Shi, 54
Guo Xiaoyan, 69
Gursky, Andreas, 385

Habermas, Jurgen, 69, 71, 296
Hall, David, 37, 80, 84, 119, 158-160, 168, 258, 312, 334
Harrod, Tanya, 235
Hammond, Jane, 120
Han Li Schol
Han Zhixun, 384ar, 110
Han Cho, 210
Hang Yong Ping, 313, 314
Harper, Glen, 78, 79, 81
Hatoun, Mona, 388
He Changyao, xxv, 172, 175-186
He Jinli, Xxv
He Yunchang, 55, 56
Hegel, Georg William, Frierich 226, 245, 271, 281
Heidegger, Martin, 154
Helong, General, 119
Hershagtter, Gail, 152
Hirst, Damien, 14, 15
Hogarth, William, 196, 374
Holbein, Hans, 380
Holzer, Jenny, 161
Homer, 203
Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 8, 89, 141, 223
Hsieh Ho, xxviii, 125, 126,129, 139,196, 213, 214, 220, 221, 224, 226, 235, 239, 243, 246, 373
Hsio-Yen Shih, 251
Hsin-I Eva Lin, 384
Hsun-tzu, 298
Hua Guofeng, 113
Huai Su, 90
Huang Jun-bi, 327
Huang Jung-Tsan, 324
Huang Keyi, 54
Huang Tingjian, 95
Huang Tu-shui, 326
Huang Xinbo, 336, 337, 338
Huang Yan, 136
Huang Yong Ping, 11, 81
Hume, David, 254, 353
Hung Tung-Lu, 330

Inada, Kenneth K., 300
I-Chen Kuo, 384

James, William, 130, 254, 281, 375, 382
Jameson, Fredric, 73, 386
Jeanne-Claude, 42
Jeneron, Philippe-Auguste, 297
Jia Youguang, 56
Jian Ju Xi, 390
Ji Dachun, 370, 372
Ji Fukun, 92, 100
Jian Ju Xi, 390
Jiang Qing, 38
Jin Hao, 279
Jones, Amelia, 147, 171, 172, 175, 181, 183 – 185
Jung, Carl Gustav, 64
Ju Li, 182
Jullien, Francois, 45, 131, 183
Jun Yang, 383

Kandinsky, Wassily, 340
Kang Youwei, 152
Kant, Immanuel, 61, 130, 152, 192, 260, 362, 365
Kaprow, Allan, 70, 404, 405
Kapur, Geeta, 386
Kelly, Mary, 161
Kentridge, William, 382, 384
Kevin Kwang, 85
Kiefer, Anselm, 184
Klein, Yves, 45
Kong Yonqian, 314
Kooning, Willem De, 225
Kosuth, Joseph, 400, 401
Kraus, Richard, 109, 112, 113

Krauss, Rosalind, 295, 296, 375
Kruger, Barbara, 161
Kuang-Yu Tsui, 384
Kublai Khan, 102
Kuiyi Shen, 305, 369
Kun-ts-an, 299
Kuo His, 201, 210
Kuspit, Donald, 70
Kwok Kian Chow, 371

Langer, Suzanne, 74, 104
Lansberger, Stefan R., 115, 116
Lao Tzu, 203, 204, 233, 234, 258
La Plante, John D., 197
Latourette, Kenneth S.,198
Lee Byng, 338
Lee, Daniel, 53, 299, 300, 304, 338, 344, 386
Lee, Pamela M. 386
Lee, Sherman E., 299, 300
Lee Ying Ho, 344
Lefebvre, Henri, 7
Leng Lin, 246, 310
Levenson, Joseph R., 201
Li Bai, 157
Li Chunhua, 115
Li Chi, 110
Li Dazhe, 54
Li Mubai, 115
Li Shan, 25, 140
Li Xiaofeng, 271
Li Xianting, 165, 166
Li Zehou, 61, 91, 402
Liang Qichao, 152
Liao Wen, 162
Lim Tzay Chuan, 384
Lin Biao, 120
Lin Fengmian, 36, 301, 305, 327
Lin Hsin-Yueh, 327, 329
Lin Yutang, 125, 126, 220, 221, 226-230
Lipps, Theodor, 218, 219
Liu Fenghua, 312
Liu Gui-Song, 325
Liu Haiping, 370
Liu Haixu, 337
Liu Kuo-Sung, 325
Liu Pei, 63
Liu Ren, 55
Liu Wei, 24, 25, 27, 383
Liu Yuedi, xxiv,, 237
Liu Xiaodong, 29, 31
Liu Xintao, 34
Lu Jie, 127, 128
Lu, Shoukun, 334, 335, 341, 343-347
Lu Xiaochuan, 55
Lu Xin, 324
Luis Chan, 338-344, 351
Luo Zhongli, 38
Lv Shengzhong, 81

Ma Baozhong, xxviii, 116, 118, 120-122, 312
Ma Qianru, 161, 162
Mai Mai Sze. 204
Malraux, Andre, 210
Manet, Eduard, 305, 317, 381
Mann, Thomas, 207
Man, Eva Kit Wah, xxv
Mangold, Sylvia, 372
Mao Zedong, 23, 25, 36, 38, 46, 60, 62, 67, 99, 100, 105, 109, 112, 113, 119, 120, 126, 127, 132, 139, 140,216, 229, 237, 238, 245, 293, 306-309, 329, 337
Margolis, Joseph, 397
Martyna, Renee,
Marx, Karl, 36, 57, 245
Masaccio, 358
Matisse, Henri, 36, 247, 265, 305, 363
Maysching, Kao, 305
Mccarthy, Mary, 43
McDougall, Bonnie S., 306
Mehmet II, 380
Meichu, 301
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice,175, 248, 258-262, 264-266, 268, 269
Meyer, James, 382, 383
Miao Xiaochun, 53
Michelangelo, 47, 53, 118, 208
Mi Fu, 95
Mills, C. Wright 70
Min Dongchao, 148-152
Mitchell, W. J., 52
Monet, Claude, 305, 360, 363, 381
Montgomerie, Captain T. G., 242
Moore, G.E., 254, 267, 268
Moore, Henry, 47
Mou Zongsan, 152
Munroe, Alexandra, 45, 46, 309, 318
Murck, Alfreda, 369, 375

Neshat, Shirin, 382, 384
Ni Tsan, 201, 353-358, 360, 364, 365
Nietzsche, Friedrich, xxvi, 154, 195, 197, 365

Nitsch, Hermann, 182
Nixon, President Richard, 37
Nochlin, Linda, 185, 238, 296, 297
Nu Wa, 157

O. Henry, 364
O'Neill, Eugene, 203
Orozco, Hsiu, 208
Owen, Stephen, 405

Paganini, Niccola, 207
Pan Fan, xxiv
Pang Pu, 277
Pan Tianshou, 92
Peng Feng, xxiv, xxv, 77, 120, 248, 249, 250, 253, 256, 267, 271
Peng Yu, 3, 5, 17-19, 383
Peng-Zhen, 119
Picasso, Pablo, 120, 193, 194, 199, 218, 303, 363, 365-367, 381, 396, 407
Pinoncelli, Pierre, 3903
Plato, 192, 194, 195, 206, 224, 357
Poggioli, Renato, 296
Politi, Giancarlo, 385
Pollack, Barbara, xix
Pollack, Jackson, 218, 225, 360
Polycrates, 208
Pound, Ezra 381
Poussin, Nicolas, 194, 198, 355, 369, 374
Proust, Marcel, 362
Pu Ru, 327
Puccini, Giacomo, 375
Puranen, Jorma, 56

Qin Feng, 86, 271, 312
Qin Hui, 95
Qin Shi Huang, 114
Qu Yuan, 110, 111
Qiu Zhijie, 11, 12, 135, 241-243

Raphael, 358, 359
Rauschenberg, Robert, 49, 318
Reilly, Maura, 185
Reinhardt, Ad, 318
Rembrandt van Rijn, 22, 193, 208
Renoir, Pierre-Auguste, 194
Richter, Gerhard, 31, 32, 34
Rielly, Mauras, 185
Rivera, Diego, 203
Rofel, Lisa, 152, 172, 173
Rosemont, Henry, Jr., 160
Rosenberg, Robert, 295
Rosler, Matha, 385
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 225, 361
Ruscha, Ed, 49
Ryman, Robert, 373

Said, Edward, 347
Saint-Simon, Henri De, 296
Sartre, Jean-paul, 359
Saussure, Fernand, 226
Scarry, Elaine, 247
Schapiro, Miriam, 161
Schewik, Beate, 235
Schiele, Egon, 118
Schneemann, Carolee, 162, 163, 167
Schopenhauer, Arthur, 152
Schult, H. A., 177
Seckel, Dietrich, 200
Seurat, Georges, 218, 297, 381
Shan Shu-tzu, 327
Shen Chou, 355, 358
Shen Yang, 55
Shenton, Lady, 339
Sherman, Cindy, 161
Shi Tao, xxviii, 214, 221, 226, 228, 230, 232, 248, 250, 251
Shi Tou, 57
Shih-ch'i, 209
Shih lung, 207
Shui Tianzhong, 371
Shu-Min Wu, 74
Shu Qun, 69
Shusterman, Richard, 71, 247, 272, 395-397
Shuyang Su, 213
Sigg, Uli, xx, 6
Signac, Paul, 297
Singh, Nain 242. 243
Siqueiros, David Alfaro, 203
Siren, Osward, 221 – 223, 237
Smith, Adam, 64
Smith, Karen, 236, 369
Smith, Terry, 375, 375
Socrates, 224
Solomon, Andrew, 25
Solomon-Godeau, Abigail, 49
Song Dong, 12, 129, 130, 137, 139, 233
Song Huizong, 54
Sontag, Susan, 55
Speed, Harold, 341
Spengler, Oswald, 197
Spinoza, Baruch, 205
St. Paul, 194, 357
Steinberg, Leo, 356

Su Shih, 95, 248, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 266
Sui Sichong, 370, 373
Sullivan, Michael, 193, 197, 280, 301-307, 309, 369
Sun Yat-Sen, 114, 300,303
Sun Yuan, 3, 5, 17, 383
Suzaki, Daisetz, 200
Svala, Inga, 9, 10

Tanari, Philip, 235
Tang Jianjun, 63
Tanguy, Yves, 204
Tao Chi (Shih-t"ao), 299
Thacker, Apnavi, 390
Thomasson, Amie, 272- 274
Thoreau, Henry David, 202
Titian, 198, 218, 222, 225
Toby, Marc, 309, 318
Toulouse Lautrec, Henri de 381
Tsai Yung, 196
Tsu Baixiung, 337

Van Gogh, Vincent, 218, 363, 365, 366, 381
Vasari, Giorgio, 360, 305, 360, 361, 373, 380
Vergine, Lee, 405
Veronese, Paolo, 38
Vetrocq, Marcia, 384
Vinci, Leonardo da, 8, 41, 141, 220
Vine, Richard, 3, 39- 41, 382, 385
Vlaminck, Maurice de, 305

Wagner, Richard, 93, 405
Wan Shang-Lin, 353-358, 360, 365, 367
Wang Chunchen, xxiv, 315
Wang Guangle, 370, 372, 373
Wang Guangyi, 9, 10, 22 -25, 27, 29, 32, 69, 311, 389
Wang Guowei, 152
Wang Hui, 369
Wang Jin, 232, 233
Wang Nanshi, 61
Wang Keping, 277
Wang Qiheng, 383
Wang Sengqian, 94
Wang Tiande, 312
Wang Wei, 205, 209
Wang Xianzhi, 95
Wang Xiomei, 371
Wang Xizhi, 95, 134, 250
Wang Yanjuan, 106
Wang Yangming, 274-276
Wang Yangqi, 249
Wang Yuechuan, 63
Warhol, Andy, 38, 49, 70, 118, 120, 309
Weil, Simone, 247
Wen Fong, 88, 89, 355
Wen Lou, 334
Wen Tong, 252-253, 256, 258, 265, 266
Wenda Gu, 39-41, 132, 133
Weiming Tu, 160
Welsch, Wolfgang, 65,271
West, Benjamin, 359
Whistler, James albert McNeil, 318, 381
White,Tyrene, 152
Willets, William, 193, 197
Williams, Donald C., 217
Wilson, Ian, 402
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, xxvii, 217, 268, 269
Woolf, Virginia, 147
Wordsworth, William, 210
Wu Chen, 252, 253, 327
Wu Chen-shuo, 327
Wu Guanzhong, 370, 371
Wu Hung, 127, 136, 310-312, 316 369
Wu Shan Zhuan, 8, 10, 13, 311
Wu Tao-Tzu, 209- 211
Wu Tien-chang, 329, 331, 332
Wucius Wong, 334, 347-349, 351, 352
Wyeth, Andrew, 22

Xiao Zian, 113
Xi De-Jin, 327
Xing Danwen, 139
Xu Bei-hung, 304, 327
Xu Bing, xxi, xxiii, xxiv, xxix, 8, 13-15, 39-41, 71, 72, 78-87, 96-109, 116-118, 132, 133, 308, 311-314
Xu Changchang, 56
Xu Zhen, 236, 238 – 243, 383

Yakusan, 401
Yan Zhenxing, 95
Yan Zhitui, 88
Yang Mao-Lin, 328, 329, 331, 332
Yang Shoabin, 240, 241, 243
Yang Xiong, 94
Yang Zichao, 182
Ye Lang, 277
Ye Yushan, 37
Yee Bon, 338

Yee Chiang, 257
Yen Zhenqing, 95
Yeondoo Jung, 384
Yi Ying, Xxiv
Yo Bogong, 57
Young, Arthur A., 304
Young, Iris, 175
Yu Yang, 56
Yuan Cai, 390
Yuan Jiang, 102
Yue Minjun, 25, 27, 32
Yueh shan, 401
Yun Gee, 304
Yun Shou'ing, 299
Yung-Ho Chang, 384

Zarathustra, 159, 365
Zeuxis, 208
Zeng Yunchao, 251
Zhang Huan, xxi, xxiii, xxix, 134, 243 – 246
Zhang Husiguan, 106
Zhang Huaijin, 94
Zhang Xiaogang, 23-25, 27, 29, 32
Zhang Xiaoling, 63
Zhang Xiaotao, 54
Zhang Yanyuan, 88
Zhang Yi, 334
Zhang Zhaohui, 8, 13, 15
Zhu Yu. 3, 5
Zheng Banqiao, 277-279
Zheng Cheng-Gong, 322
Zhou Xiaoru, 161, 162
Zhou-En-Lai, 38 113, 119, 309
Zhou Yuejin, 63
Zhu De-Chun, 327
Zhuangzi, 157-159, 252, 253, 316

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 Wang Guangyi, *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola* (1993). Oil on canvas. Photograph courtesy of the Asia Society, New York.

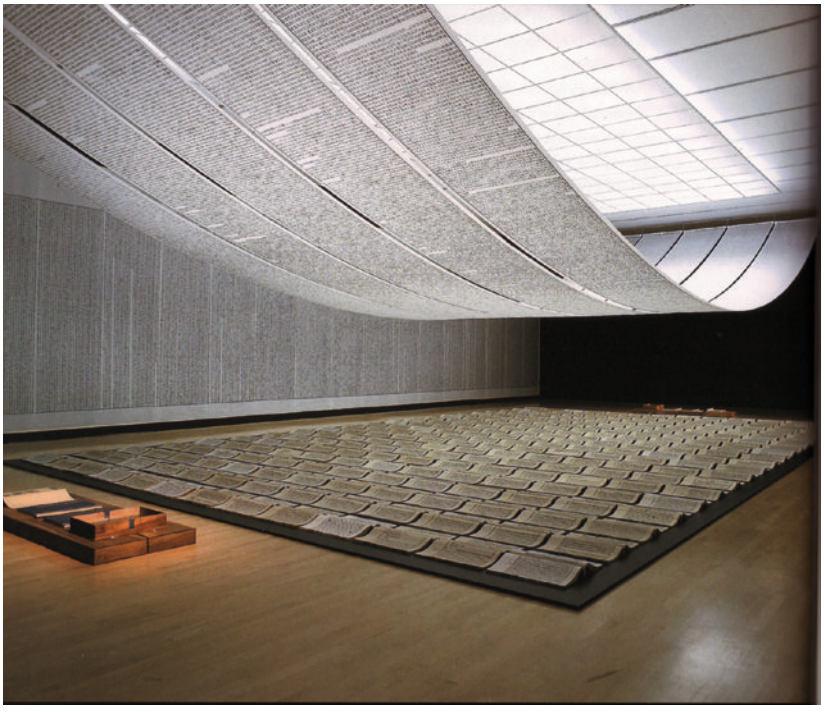


Fig. 2 Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky* (1988). Hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls from false letter blocks, installation view at the National Gallery of Canada, Ontario, 1988. Photograph courtesy of the Xu Bing Studio.



Fig. 3 Chen Lingyang, *Twelve Flower Months for the First Month Narcissus* (1999). Photograph reproduced by permission of the Modern Chinese Art Foundation.



Fig. 4 Fang Lijun, *2006.5.1* (2006). Oil on canvas. 250 x 360 cm. Photograph courtesy of Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.

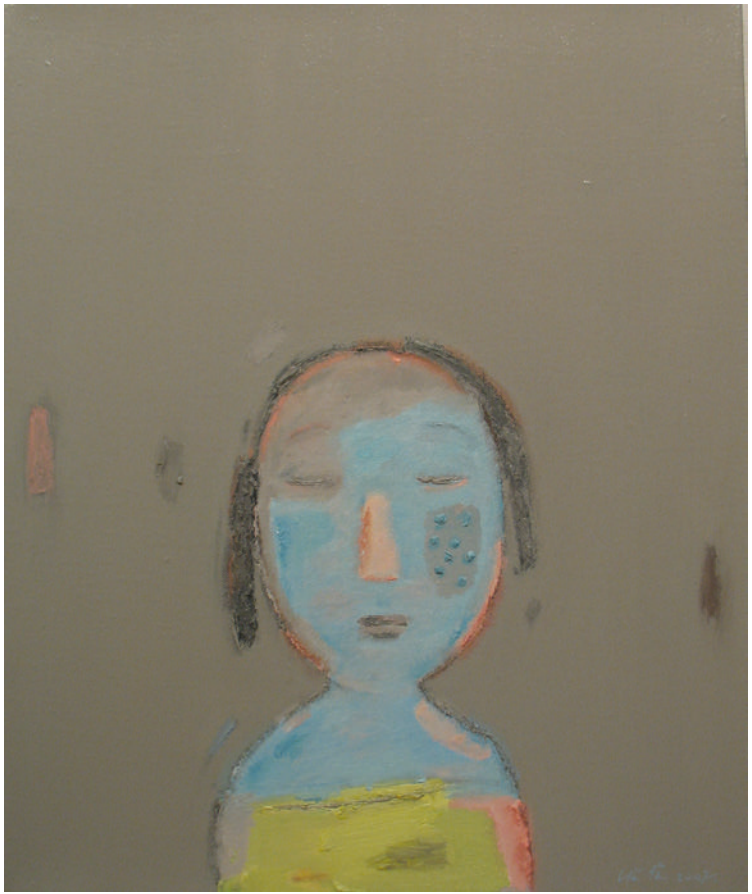


Fig. 5 Chen Shuxia, *Fashion Face* (2007). Oil on canvas. 50 x 60 cm. Photograph courtesy Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.



Fig. 6 Liu Xintao, *Despondent Night* (2006). Oil on canvas. 150 x 200 cm. Photograph courtesy of Yang@Trioche Gallery, Israel.



Fig. 7 Liu Xintao, *Despondent Night #10* (2008). Oil on canvas. 200 x 300 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 8 Liu Xintao, *Despondent Night #2* (2010). Oil on canvas. 300 x 200 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 9 Guan Shi, *Beam* (2008). 120 x 160 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig.10 Cai Weidong, *The 8th of the 12th* (2008). 97 x 200 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig.11 Liu Ren, *Dreamsleeper or Sleepwalker—The Musical* (2007). C-Print, 99 x 90 cm. 77 x 70 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 12 Liu Ren, *Sleepwalker—The Forbidden City* (2007). C-Print, 129 x 90 cm. 100 x 70 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 13 Lu Xiaochuan, *Last Supper* (2009). Ultra giclee, 340 x 110 cm. or 170 x 56 cm. Photograph courtesy of Lu Xiaochuan.

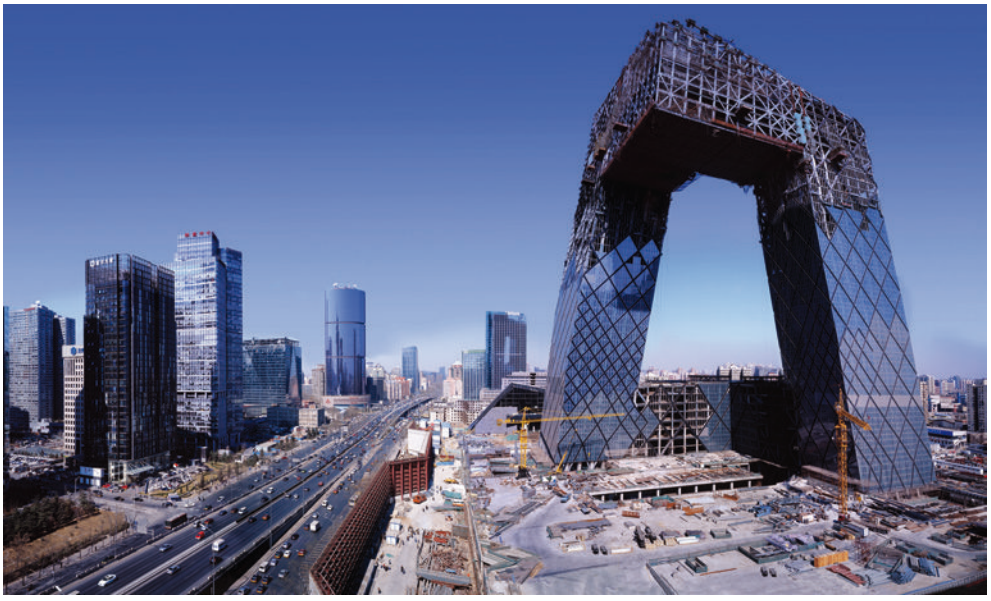
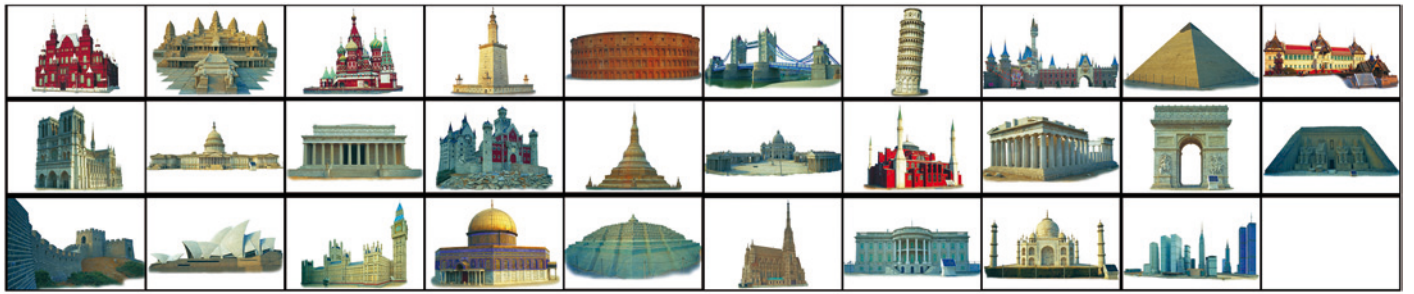


Fig. 14 Yu Yang, *New Landscape in Beijing CCTV Tower* (2008). 220 x 480 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 15 Xu Changchang, *My Mona Lisa* (2007). 105.5 x 150 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



艺术家：贾有光
作品名称：《人造风景—世界工厂》
拍摄时间：2006年
质地形式：激光数码输出
图片制作时间：2007年
制作等级：艺术品收藏级
套件数量：29幅/套
作品尺寸：220cm×145cm×29
限量编号：1/9-9/9

Artist：Jia you guang
Still Life：The World Factory-Manufactured Landscape
Date Photographed：2006
Media：Digital output
Date Printed：2007
Standard：Art Work Collection Standard
Series：29Pieces in a Series
Size：220cm×145cm×29
Edition No：1/9-9/9

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Fig. 16 Jia Youguang, *World Factory—Manufactured Landscape*. Digital output, 220 cm x 145 cm x 29 pieces. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

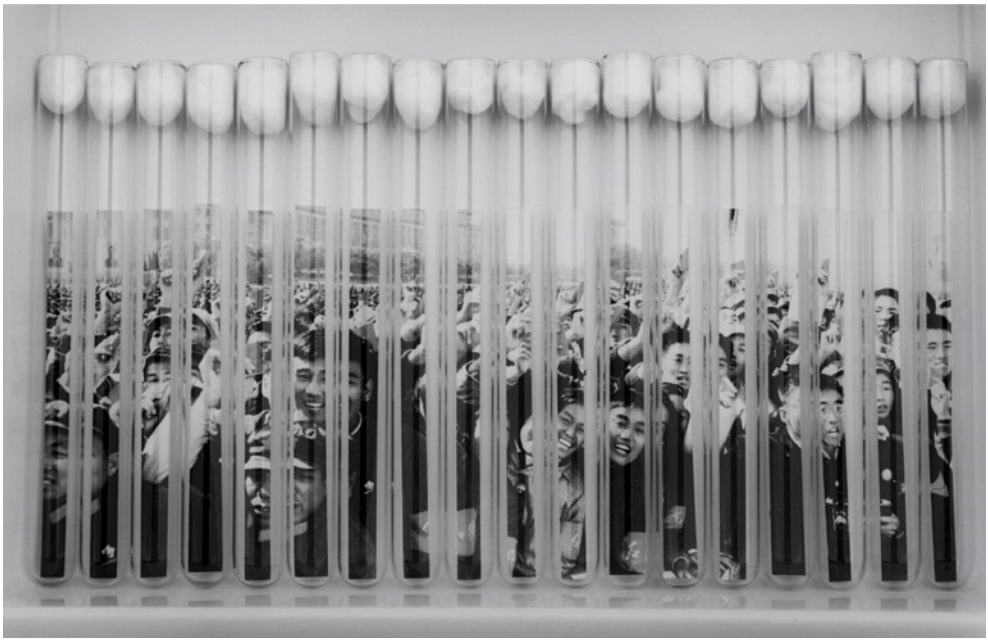


Fig. 17 Yu Bogong, *Ceremony* (2007). Mixed media, 50 x 75 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

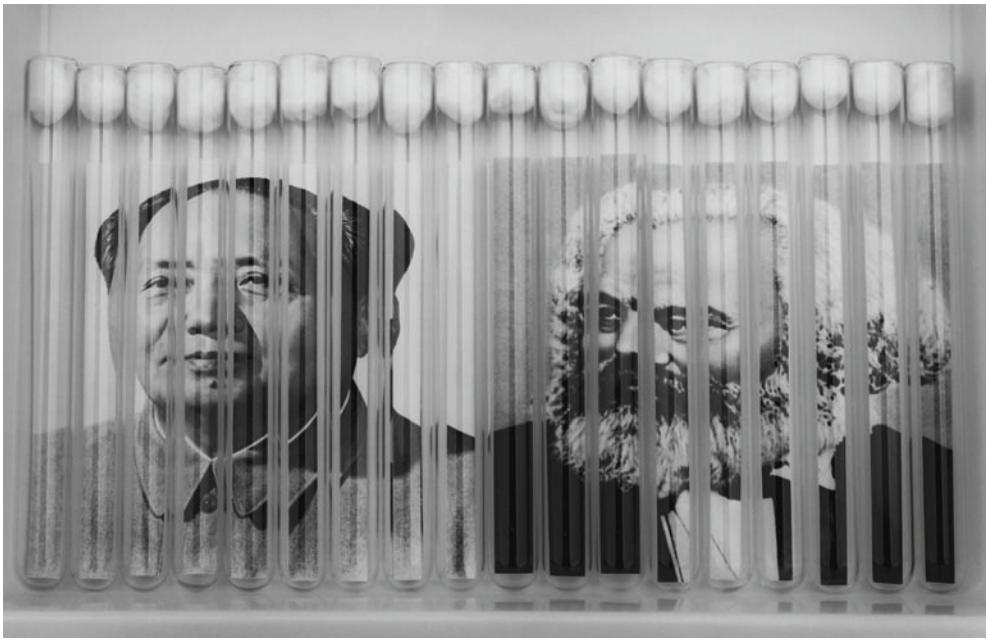


Fig. 18 Yu Bogong, *Marx and Mao.* Mixed media, 50 x 75 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

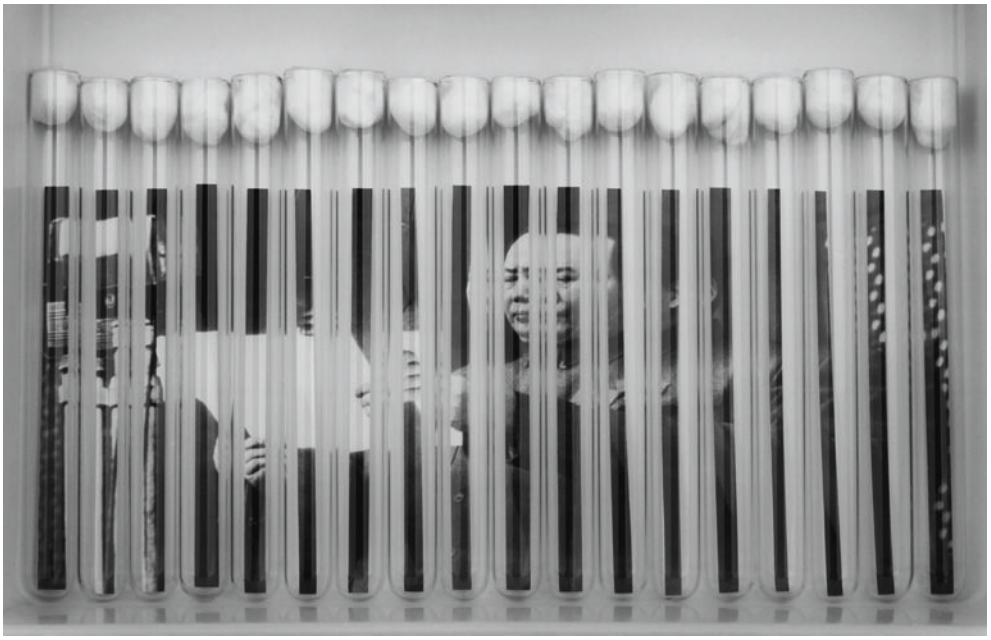


Fig. 19 Yu Bogong, *Transformation* (2008). Mixed media, 50 x 75 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 20 Chen Weiqun, *10* (2006–2007). 162 x 120 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig 21 Xu Bing, *English Calligraphy or Square Word Calligraphy* [*Bo Peep*] (1994). Example of square word calligraphy. Photograph courtesy of the Xu Bing Studio.

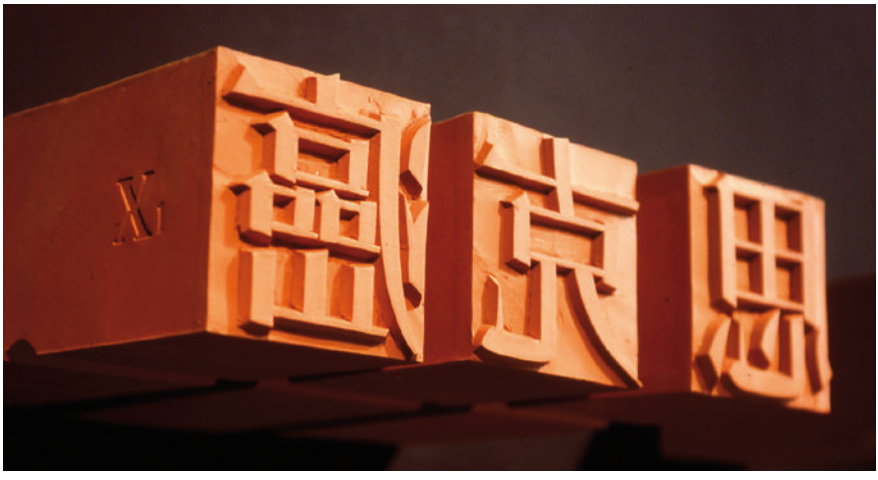


Fig. 22 Xu Bing, *"A, B, C …"* (1991). Set of 26 ceramic printing blocks. Unglazed terracotta. Installation Bronx Museum of Art. Photograph courtesy of the Xu Bing Studio.

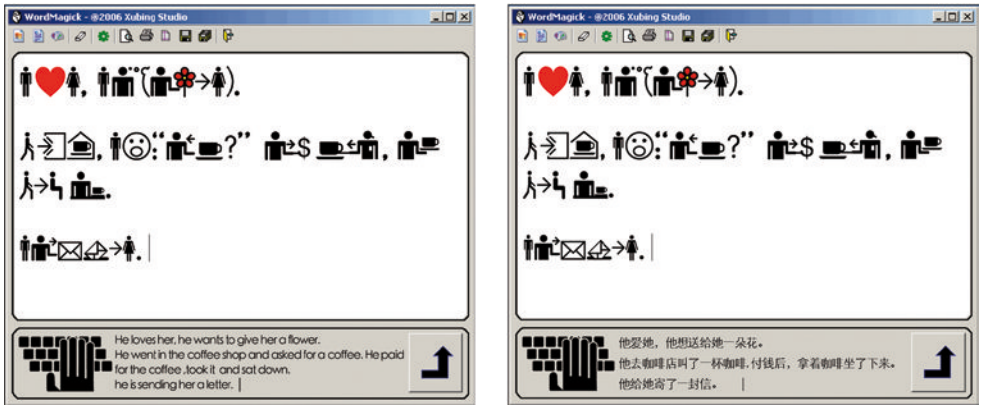


Fig. 23 Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground* (2003). Mixed media, software, works on paper. Photograph courtesy of the Xu Bing Studio.



Fig. 24 *Terracotta Female Dancers*, Tang Dynasty (618 907 A.D.). White terracotta, lead glaze H: 17 cm. Paris, Guimet Museum of Asian Art. Courtesy of Art Resource, New York



Fig. 25 Huang Yan, *Chinese Landscape Tatoo*, Chromogenic print, 31 1/2 x 39 3/8 in. Collection Artur Walther. Courtesy Priska C. Juschka Fine Arts, New York.



Fig. 26 Xing Danwen, *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995). Three black and white photographs, right and left, each 20 x 13.48 inches, center, 20 x 30 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 27 Cui Xiuwen, *Sanjie* (2003). Digitally manipulated chromogenic print mounted on plexiglass. Image size: 18 7/16 x 118 1/16 inches. Mounted size: 20 3/8 x 120 1/16 inches. A. J. Japour. Photograph courtesy Cui Ziuwen Studio.

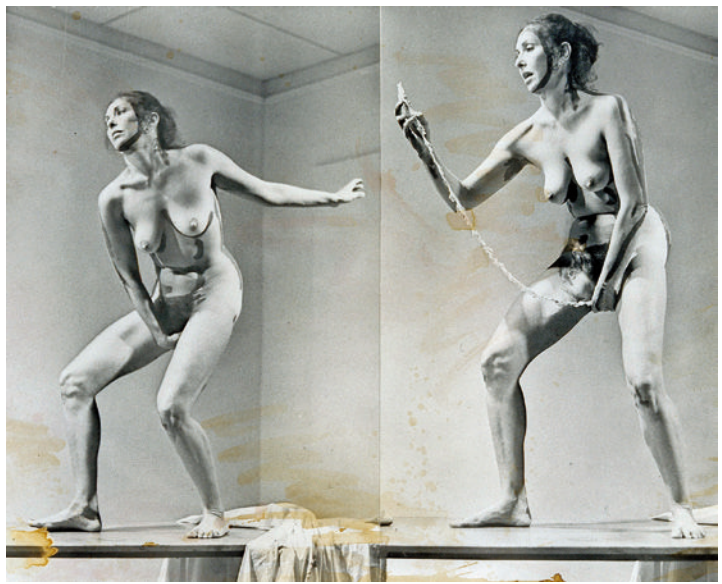


Fig. 28 Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll* (1975). Performance, East Hampton, Long Island, N.Y. Photograph courtesy of Art Resouces, New York. Permission, courtesy of Artists Rights Society, New York.

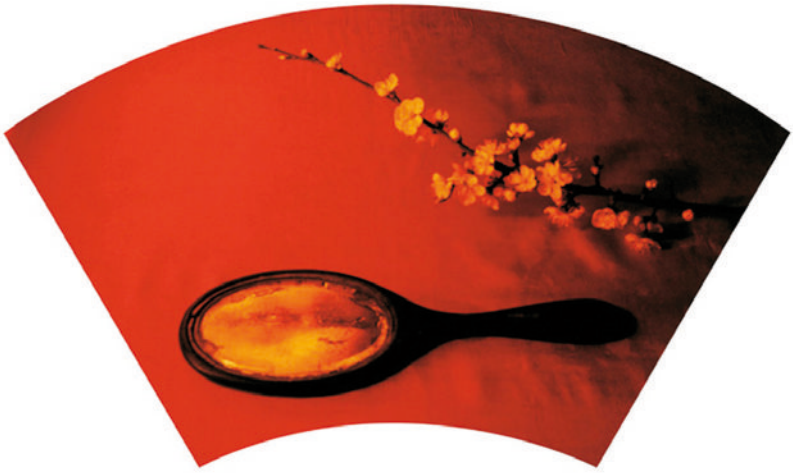


Fig. 29 Chen Lingyang, *Twelve Flower Months for the Third Month Peach* (1999). Photograph reproduced by permission of the Modern Chinese Art Foundation.



Fig. 30 He Chengyao, *Homage to Joseph Beuys* (2002). Photograph reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 31 He Chengyao, *99 Needles* (2002). Photograph reproduced courtesy of the artist.

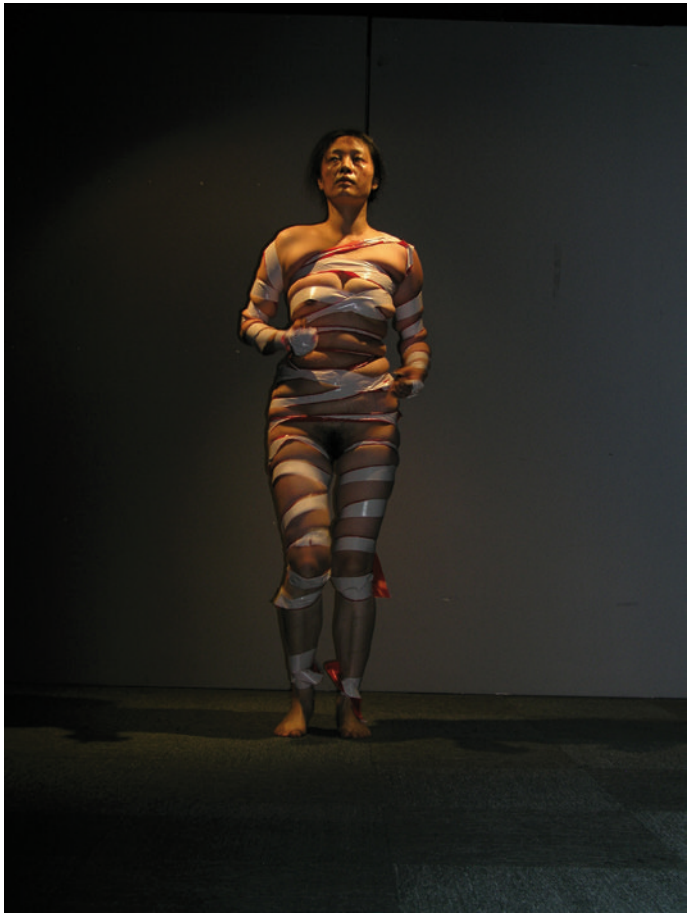


Fig. 32 He Chengyao, *Public Broadcast Exercise* (2004). Photograph reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 33 Wu Tien-chang, *On the Rule of Chiang Kai-shek* (1990). Oil on canvas, 310 x 360 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 34 Wu Tien-chang, *On the Rule of Chiang Ching-kuo* (1990). Oil on canvas, 310 x 360 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 35 Yang Mao-lin, *Zeelandia Memorandum* (1987). Oil on canvas, 194 x 97 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 36 Lin Hsin-yueh, *Back to the Root*, (1998). Oil on canvas, 210 x 419 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 37 Yang Mao-lin, *Great Mazinger*, (2009). Metal sculptures of manga and comic book characters exhibited in *The Temple of Sublime Beauty—Made in Taiwan* in the 2009 Venice Biennale. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 38 Luis Chan, *Dragon Festival* (1980s). Ink and colour on paper, 69 x 135 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art. Reproduced courtesy of Hong Kong Museum of Art.



Fig. 39 Lu Shoukkun, *Zen Painting* (1970). Ink and colour on paper, 180 x 97 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art. Reproduced courtesy of Hong Kong Museum of Art.



Fig. 40 Wucius Wong, *Purification # 2* (1979). Ink and colour on paper 72 x 34 in. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art. Reproduced courtesy of Hong Kong Museum of Art.

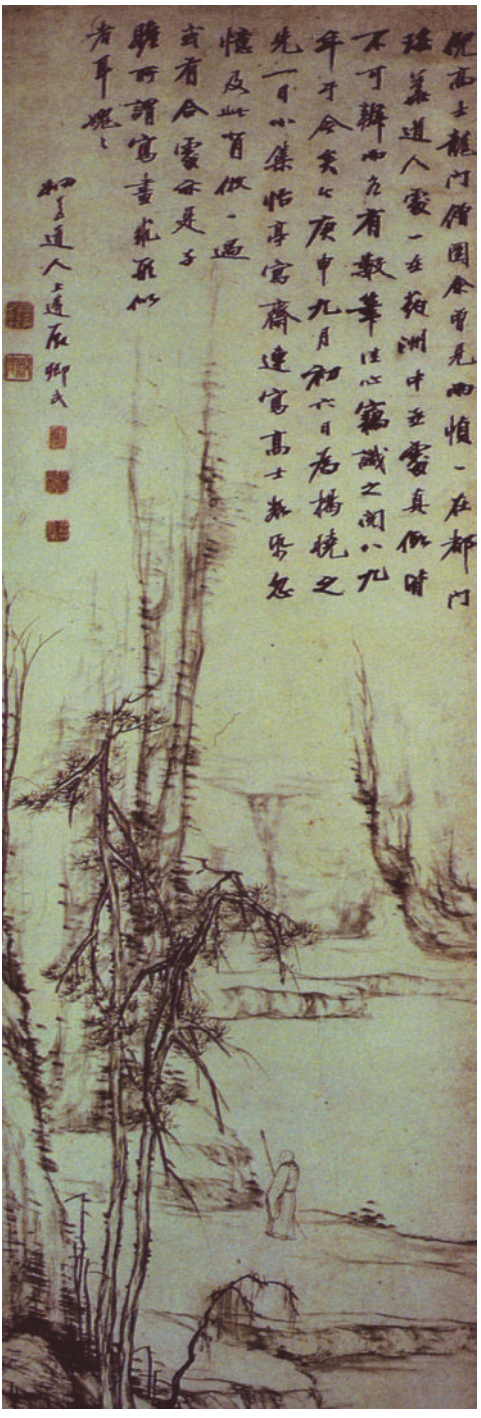


Fig. 41 Wan Shang-Lin (1739–1813), *Landscape with Monk*. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Ellsworth Collection of 19th and 29th Century Art



Fig. 42. Ni Tsan (1301–1374), *Empty Groves After Rain*. Chinese National Palace, Taiwan

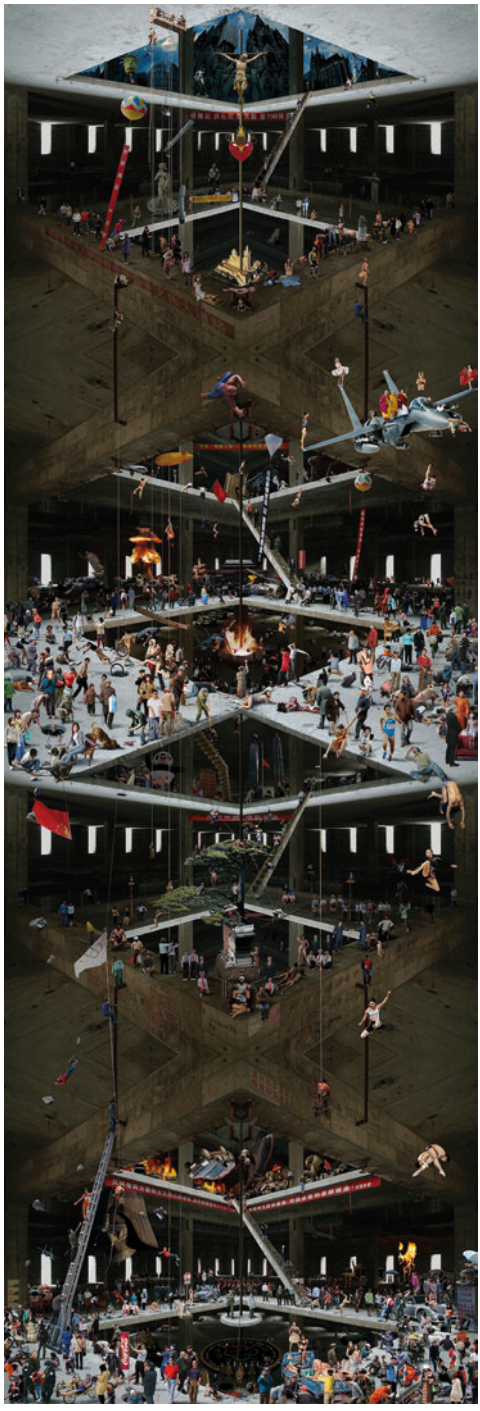


Fig. 43 Gao Brothers, *The Forever Unfinished Building, # 4* (2008). C Print, 295 x 100 cm. Reproduced courtesy of ifa gallery.contemporary art, Shanghai.

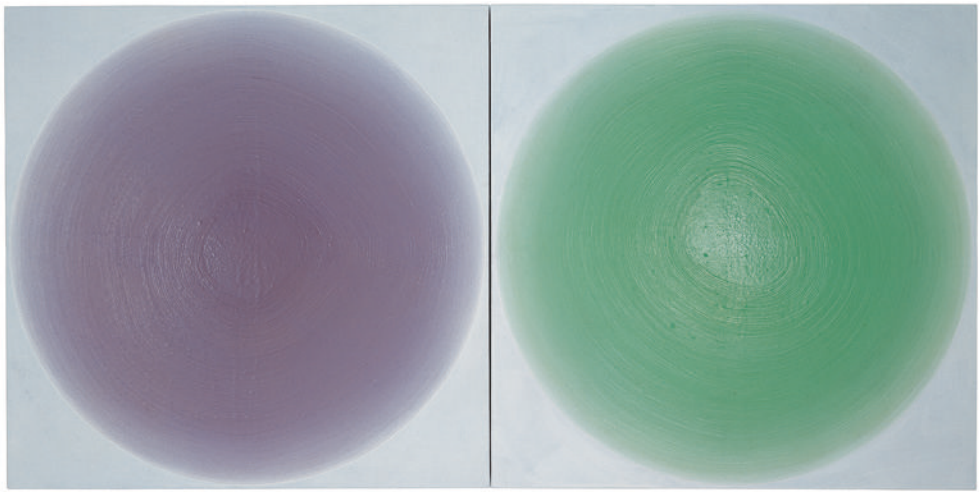


Fig. 44 Wang Guangle, *Coffin Paint* (2008). Acrylic on canvas, 112 x 112 cm. Reproduced courtesy of aye gallery, Beijing.