Contemporary Chinese Art

Post-socialist, Post-traditional, Post-colonial

Jeanne Boden

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I remember a time when I didn't want to be a Chinese artist; I didn't even want to be Chinese. But these days, I feel quite lucky to be a Chinese guy. I'm so proud of our calligraphic tradition. And I'm very lucky that I can understand a little more than Western people who look at this work. For this kind of calligraphy, you get a lot more out of it if you really know Chinese. When I was young, I thought the most important thing was to be a pioneer, but I'm slowly getting old. I'm 43 now, with many white hairs, and I'm interested in quiet, classical, beautiful traditions. And at the same time, I'm worried about history.
Feng Mengbo (artist)

Almost every internationally renowned Chinese artist's work today is obviously and closely associated with traditional Chinese history, culture and ideology, and as a result, has a distinctly Chinese flavor. As a Chinese viewer, I am very sensitive to any Chinese element; as a curator and critic, I have yet to come across works by Chinese artists that have no evident relation to Chinese tradition. Given the importance of Chinese tradition in the works of contemporary artists, tracing that tradition is a crucial part of understanding their art.
Zhang Zhaohui (artist/curator)

From the standpoint of present society, I am not trying to criticize anything; rather, my hope is to create signifiers of cultural memory for future generations.
Wang Guangyi (artist)

In this globalized world, we are no different from Westerners.
Gong Yan (artist)
It is meaningful when a Chinese artist speaks these words. But would a Western artist speak the same words?
Zhu Xiaowen (critic/curator)

Table of contents

List of illustrations		page 6
Acknowledgements		8
Introduction: Chinese art? Ethnic art? Western art? Global art?		11
General introduction		12
General research conditions		16
The structure of the book		22
Practical note on the use of Chinese characters and transcription		23
Chapter 1: Chinese art in East and West		25
1.1	Introduction	26
1.2	China: Post-socialist	27
1.3	China: Post-traditional	29
1.4	China: Post-colonial	31
1.5	Discourse, constructs, and limits of theory	35
1.6	Non-Western art in the West	38
1.7	The Venice Biennale in post-colonial times	40
1.8	Chinese artists in Passage to the East in Venice 1993	42
1.9	Selecting Chinese artists for the 1993 Venice Biennale	45
1.10	Conclusion	50
Chapter 2: Chinese art going global		53
2.1	Introduction	54
2.2	The birth of contemporary Chinese art	54
2.3	Main evolutions in contemporary Chinese art pre-1978	55
2.3.1	Chinese art at the beginning of the 20th century	55
2.3.2	Socialist Realism – art as political tool: 1949–1978	56
2.3.3	Underground art during the Cultural Revolution: No Name Group	57
2.4	Main evolutions in contemporary Chinese art post-1978	58
2.4.1	From Socialist Realism to a ‘point of no return’ in 1989	58
2.4.2	Post-1989 evolutions	76
2.5	The Passage to the East artists	80
2.6	Conclusion	90
Chapter 3. Post-social: Chinese art from socialist to post-socialist		95
3.1	Introduction	96
3.2	Impact of political events on artists	98
3.3	From Socialist Realism to the reality of post-socialism	115
3.4	Opening up new artistic languages and methods	140
3.5	The Mao Zedong legacy	152
3.6	Art and politics: An ongoing negotiation	160
3.7	Top-down discourse past and present	169
3.8	Bottom-up dynamics	175
3.9	Art as part of the economy	175
3.10	Conclusion	176
Chapter 4: Post-traditional: Chinese art between tradition and innovation		183
4.1	Introduction	184
4.2	The spiritual dimension of art	185
4.3	The Chinese language as a source of inspiration	191
4.4	Calligraphy and ink painting tradition in contemporary art	199
4.5	China’s cultural past incorporated in contemporary art	206
4.6	Conclusion	209
Chapter 5: Post-colonial: Chinese art between China and the West		213
5.1	Introduction	214
5.2	Discovering non-Chinese art and taking a position	214
5.3	Exploring the local: One’s own Chinese background	230
5.4	Post-colonial: Reviving the local and taking a position	237
5.5	Curatorial practices in the West	240
5.6	Conclusion	241
Epilogue		245
Appendices		251
1.	Glossary of Chinese titles in pinyin and characters	252
2.	Glossary of Chinese names in pinyin and characters	253
3.	Glossary of Chinese terms in pinyin and characters	257
4.	Consulted bibliography	263

List of illustrations

Liu Wei, Untitled / *Wuti,* 1999	pages 11 + 132
Sun Liang, Moon Tattoo / *Wenshen yueliang,* 1996	25 + 195
Geng Jianyi, Face Made By Liquids / *Liuchu de lian,* 2000	53 + 168
Yu Youhan, A Human Being Intrinsically Dies / *Yi ren gu you yi si,* 1998	95 + 158
Yu Hong, Witness, Growing Up / *Muji chengzhang xilie,* 1966, 1968, 1974, 1983	111
Sun Liang, Icarus and the Nine Suns / *Yikaluosi yu jiuge taiyang,* 1989	114
Geng Jianyi, Forms and Certificates / *Biaoge he zhengshu,* 1988	124
Geng Jianyi, Forms and Certificates / *Biaoge he zhengshu,* 1988 (close ups)	125
Zhang Peili, Brown Book No.1 / *Hepi shu yihao,* 1988	127
Fang Lijun, Series 2 (10) / *Xilie er (zhi shi),* 1991–1992	130
Feng Mengbo, MPA 02, My Private Album / *Siren zhaoxiang bu,* 1996	133
Li Shan, Rouge No 9 / *Yanzhi xilie 9 hao,* 1990	138
Li Shan, Reading No 6 / *Yuedu 06,* 2006	138
Xu Bing's crew working on the Wall in 1990	145
Xu Bing, Ghosts Pounding the Wall / *Gui da qiang,* 1990–1991	145 + 177
Yu Youhan 1985-2	147
Yu Youhan 1986	147
Ding Yi, Appearances of Crosses / *Shishi,* 1991-3	148
Ding Yi, Appearances of Crosses / *Shishi,* 2012-8	149
Zhang Peili, 30x30, 1988	151
Feng Mengbo, TMDBS 01, Taking Mt Doom by Strategy / *Zhiqu Doom Shan,* 1997	153
Fang Lijun, Woodcut 2003.2.1 / *Muke banhua 2003.2.1,* 2003	155
Geng Jianyi, Eternal Rays of the Sun / *Yongfang guangmang,* 1992	155
Wang Guangyi, East Wind-Golden Dragon / *Dongfeng – Jinlong,* 2006–2007	159
Zhang Peili, Hygiene Document No. 3 / *"Wei" zi 3 hao,* 1991	164
Zhang Peili, Water – Cihai Standard Pronunciation / *Shui – Cihai biaozhun ban,* 1991	165
Song Haidong, Untitled / *Wuti,* 1993	183
Fang Lijun, Sketch (no. 6) / *Sumiao (zhi liu),* 1989–1990	184
Xu Bing, small wooden parts	188
Xu Bing, Book from the Sky print board	188
Xu Bing, Book from the Sky / *Tianshu,* 1988	189
Xu Bing, New English Calligraphy / *Xin yingwen shufa,* 1996	191
Geng Jianyi, Visible Daily Pictures / *Kejian de richang yinghua,* 2007	192
Feng Mengbo, WCSS2008XL01, Wrong Code: Shanshui / *Luanma shanshui 2008XL01,* 2008	194
Sun Liang, Gloomy Light / *Youguang,* 1996	195
Xu Bing, Field / *Tian,* 1987	196
Fang Lijun, 68.8-68.5, 1990–91	197
Fang Lijun, 68.7x68.2, 1990–91	197
Liu Wei, We Love Nature / *Women re ai da ziran,* 1999	198
Yu Hong, Figure and Ground / *Xing yu chang,* 2005	202
Yu Hong, Gymnastics Education / *Ticao jiaolian,* 2006	202 + 213
Wang Guangyi, Post-Classical – Death of Marat A / *Hou gudian – Mala zhi si A,* 1987	219
Wang Guangyi, Great Criticism: Wang Guangyi / *Da pipan: Wang Guangyi,* 2005	220
Wang Ziwei Goodbye Kiss / *Wenbie,* 2010	223
Wang Ziwei, Hopeless / *Wuwang,* 2010	223
Wang Ziwei, Mao Zedong with Moustache No. 5 / *Changxu de Mao Zedong 5 hao,* 2010	223 + 245
Yu Hong, Ladder to the Sky / *Tianti,* 2008	226

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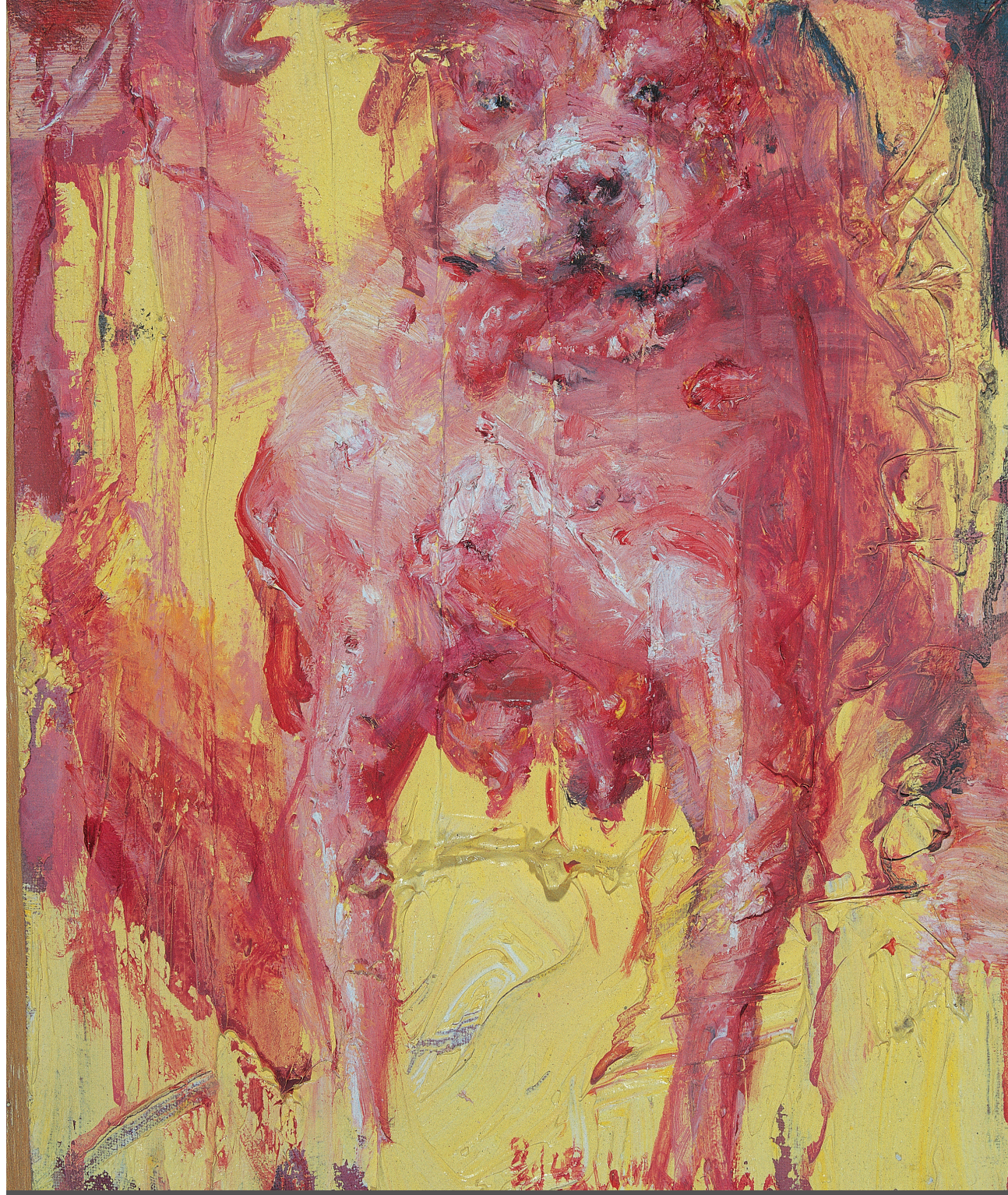
Liu Wei, *Untitled*, 1999, oil on canvas, 25 x 20.4cm ▶



General introduction

This book looks at contemporary art from China, often termed as ‘contemporary Chinese art’ or ‘Chinese contemporary art’. The focus here is not so much ‘art’ for its ‘aesthetic’ or ‘art historical’ value. The goal is to ‘contextualize’ Chinese contemporary art between China and the West, between the local and the global, between tradition and innovation, between the dominant discourse of the Chinese government and the individual artistic freedom of the artists.

Since the opening up of China and the development of contemporary Chinese art, the post-colonial context has influenced how this kind of art has been received in the West. The lack of an equal dialogue between the Chinese and the international art scene has been an issue for many Chinese artists, critics, and curators. The impotence of the West in dealing with China as an equal partner in general is reflected in the field of art. This incapacity is fed by long held and prevailing biased perceptions of China, on the one hand mythologizing (the craze for Chinese art in the 1990s is exemplary), and on the other disdainful (the politicizing of Chinese art or considering Chinese art as a derivation of Western art). The Chinese from their side also have a complex relationship with the West. Since the Opium War in the 19th century, China has admired the West (taking the West as a model to learn from), but at the same time has felt frustrated about Western dominance (evidenced in the effort to save and strengthen the Chinese nation and build nationalist rhetoric). Despite China’s rapid modernization, mutually biased perceptions persist. Since the end of the 19th century, China has searched for a balance between tradition and modernization and this search continues today. Therefore we will look into the post-traditional state of Chinese art. And finally, since opening up in 1978, China has modernized rapidly, but the Chinese Communist Party remains in power in the one-party state. This puts China is in a post-socialist condition. These three conditions of post-colonial, post-traditional and post-socialist add up to the complexity of the context in which contemporary Chinese art takes place.

Many people in the art world are aware of the post-colonial condition, but little attention has been paid to it. Most books on Chinese art do not mention it. In the 1284 pages of Lü Peng’s *History of Art in 20th Century China*, only two and a half pages address this problem.[1] Lü Peng’s book is of course an art history book, which is not the right place to address this problem in any depth.

Already in the 1990s, curator and art critic Fei Dawei argued that Chinese artists had found their own language and that the relationship with Western art was changing. He claimed that Chinese artists were no longer mere spectators of Western art, but had actually entered into dialogue with it. According to Fei Dawei this dialogue no longer ‘focused on explaining the Chinese perspective within a framework of Western thought and vocabulary,’ but rather had become ‘a quest to derive from cultural differences themes and forms which go beyond the Western framework’ and ‘introduced new elements and perspectives to the plurality of contemporary art’.[2] Fei Dawei states that Chinese art goes ‘beyond’ the Western framework, implying that the Chinese bring something new to Western art. What are these ‘new elements and perspectives’ that Chinese artists bring? In what way do Chinese artists go beyond the Western framework?

In 2000, Wang Lin saw art in China as a testimony of the ‘local’, rooted in an ancient culture and particular aesthetic framework, as well as in the existential Chinese experience of the individual artist. But he also claims a ‘spiritual difference’ that distinguishes the Chinese from others: “As an important nation with a long history, China will not lightly acknowledge or come to agree with the value proposition that is ‘the other’. Even as it moves forward along the road toward modernity, it will strive to maintain and develop its own thinking and knowledge, as well as an aesthetic awareness of its own. A complex cultural predicament, that is timely and up-to-date, a dynamic spiritual power and the psychology of a major nation, makes the existential experience of the Chinese people the primary resource for contemporary art, and

the artistic underpinning of a cultural identity for these artists. When I refer to 'the China experience', it is not the existential experience of a race, nor am I referring to experiences deriving from traditional culture. Such things if overly dogmatic can have the effect of inhibiting art. With regard to conceptual art, the China experience is but the existential experience of the individual Chinese person; it is the concrete part (as opposed to the whole); it is the natural state of individual reality. This distinction is important if we are to preserve historical, regional and cultural states of being, as well as the spiritual difference that distinguishes us all from the others."[3] Wang Lin is not only aware of the local flavor; he is also concerned with 'preserving' it. In the same statement he says that on the one hand China will not accept to be put in the position of the 'other', and on the other, he feels the need 'to distinguish us from the others'. This is the complexity we deal with in this book: Chinese art finding its place between tradition and innovation, between global and local, and as Wang Lin correctly expresses, the level of the individual artist who is confronted with all these tensions.

In 2008, the Chinese art critic Zhu Qi argued for an open attitude by Chinese artists but warned not to sacrifice the 'priority of nationality': "Contemporary art can only live and thrive in the gaps in the landscape of international culture. On the one hand, Chinese art must never enter the Americanized (and American dominated) system in the quest for universalism because this would entail sacrificing the priority of nationality; on the other, it would be unwise to return to cultural conservatism of national culture".[4] This statement equally reflects the concern of connecting with the global, while preserving the local.

In 2010, a panel discussion was set up in Shanghai with Li Zhenhua, Qiu Zhijie, Hu Jieming and Zhang Peili to address questions such as "Why is China adopting Western models and structures? Has Chinese contemporary art been instrumentalized by the international art system, and does this continue to occur? Did Chinese artists play the game, not realizing the long-term effects of this process on the artistic environment in

China? Where does the 'mainstream' start that artists are so concerned about? Isn't art more about the media and impact these days? How much of an outsider can one be? Why does everybody seem so fed up with talking about China in relation to the West? Is there a possible way of approaching this exhausted theme, making it new and relevant? Is there any hope for cultural exchange?"[5] These topics suggest that the China/West dialogue in the field of art is insufficient.

An awareness of the local Chinese context in relation to the international art world and the discrepancies between the two can be detected in these questions to which it is difficult and complex to find answers.

The international craze about Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s and soaring prices on the art market reflected the global discovery of its potential. Nevertheless, until today many artists in China complain that their art is viewed as 'Chinese' first, before its aesthetical value is considered. Western curators and critics too easily claim that Chinese artists produce art to please an international art public, copying Western art, which implies that what they produce is inferior. In Western art history, non-Western art is often still treated as 'ethnic art'; non-Western art is displayed in 'Ethnic/Minority/Asian/Tropical/Foreign Civilizations/Colonial' museums and collections. In spite of growing awareness of the 'global' dimension of art, affecting general attitudes towards curatorship, museums, exhibition layouts and so on, power structures remain in place. Perhaps the West is not ready to accept the global developments of our time, even in art.

On the other hand, many Chinese seem to be obsessed with the 'Chinese' character of their art, explicitly differentiating Chinese art from other art, Chinese culture from other 'cultures' and the Chinese nation from other nations.

With globalization, not only are disciplines questioned, but even the Western-dominated academic theoretical framework. The Chinese often claim that Chinese art cannot be

fully appreciated by applying Western theories or using only Western art terms. If Western theories do not fit the study of Chinese art, can we rely on a Chinese framework? Can we study contemporary Chinese art from the point of view of traditional Chinese aesthetics? Would it be possible to use the six rules of Xie He and the traditional ink painting techniques as the basis for an interpretation of contemporary Chinese artwork? In the study of contemporary Chinese art the limits would immediately become clear because contemporary Chinese art has developed in interaction with the global art scene. The application of a purely Chinese framework would not cover the complexity of the material, in the same way as applying only a Western theoretical framework would not suffice.

It is obvious that contemporary Chinese art blossomed in a climate of intensive interaction between the local Chinese and the global art context, but China also has its own art tradition. Can we speak about 'Chinese' art in a globalized world? Can art be 'Chinese'? The contextualization of the position of a number of Chinese artists and their work in this book will help us to grasp the complexity.

General research conditions

During research for this book, two general conditions occurred to me. Firstly, the scattered material (although since I started this research in 2007 the situation has improved tremendously), which I think is a consequence of the fact that initially contemporary Chinese art was not officially approved or fully accepted in China. Contemporary art was long kept in a relatively marginal position, tolerated by the Chinese government, but certainly not strongly supported.

Until quite recently, information on contemporary Chinese art was dispersed and there was a lack of systemization. Now official museums for contemporary art are starting to open in China. There remains, however, a tension between the official art institutions in China and the international commercial contemporary Chinese art scene.

Information about contemporary artists is not widely available through official channels in China. International developments in art that took place in the latter half of the 20th century do not feature prominently on the Chinese art curriculum. Post-1978 contemporary Chinese art still occupies a rather peripheral position in art schools.

Material on contemporary Chinese art is difficult to find in official libraries and bookshops on Mainland China. When I visited the huge library at Peking University I hardly found anything on the artists I focus on in this book. Entering their names in the computer to search the library archives delivered few results. Only officially recognized magazines and newspapers were available. I found no catalogues or biographies on any of the artists, nor did I find any catalogues on contemporary art exhibitions. The magazines *Meishu, Jiangsu Huakan, Meishu Yanjiu* and *Beijing Qingnian Bao* were available, but not the alternative magazines established in the 1980s to cover new developments in art at the time, such as *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* and *Meishu Sichao*. These magazines were critical in the establishment of contemporary Chinese art. They may exist somewhere in the library, but there was no access to them during my research.

Information on contemporary Chinese artists is also very much absent in official bookshops such as the Xinhua bookshops and the many huge 'book cities' in every major city, even in specialized art bookshops like the Shanghai Art Bookshop. Most of these bookshops do not have a single book on avant-garde and experimental art, or contemporary Chinese art in general.

Various art critics have tried to systematize information on contemporary Chinese art. In 2007, Fei Dawei was curator of the *'85 New Wave* exhibition at the Ullens Center (UCCA) in the 798 Art Zone.[6] The introductory part of that exhibition was a treasure trove of historical information and documentation. During the exhibition, interviews with participating artists were available via audio device. The UCCA obviously had major ambitions. A research center with a library was started, but unfortunately it never fully developed. Fei Dawei published some promising books. The *'85 Xinchao dang'an I, ['85*

New Wave, File I] and *'85 Xinchao dang'an II, ['85 New Wave, File II]* promised to grow into a series, but apparently no other books have followed these first two and the library was not opened to the public.

Gao Minglu also set up his own center: the Gao Minglu Contemporary Art Center *(Gao Minglu xiandangdai yishu yanjiu zhongxin)*, registered in New York but meant to be operational in China.[7] At Peking University, the Center for Visual Arts *(Shijue yu tuxiang yanjiu zhongxin)* headed by Zhu Qingsheng, is hidden away in a corner of the huge campus. This center is active in organizing exhibitions, but it does not really function as a research center. Its small library contains mainly international publications, besides a number of monographs on artists and exhibition catalogs.

In Hong Kong, there is the Asia Art Archive (AAA),[8] which may be the most independent library on contemporary Chinese and Asian art. Wu Hung worked closely with AAA on the Contemporary Chinese Art Primary Documents project. During one of my research visits to the AAA in August and September 2010, the new website www.china1980s.org and the very valuable book edited by Wu Hung – *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art From 1980–1990* were launched. For this project, information from the 1980s in China was gathered and organized in a systematic way and made publicly available, much of it also in English translation. This was a major achievement. The launch took place in Hong Kong on September 7, 2010 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, in Beijing on September 9, 2010 at the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts, in Shanghai on September 11, 2010 at the Minsheng Xiandai Meishuguan and in New York at the MoMa on October 15, 2010. This project is one of the crucial contributions to documenting contemporary Chinese art and to making it available to an international public.

The AAA has a fantastic collection of documentation on contemporary Chinese art, such as the important magazines and newspapers *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* and *Meishu Sichao*, which I had not found in the official library of Peking University. But even there,

in spite of the enormous collection donated by artists and critics, a lot of information about the contemporary art scene on Mainland China is still lacking. ShanghArt Gallery at Moganshanlu in Shanghai, owned by Lorenz Helbling, also has a nice collection of books and catalogs, which I found very worthwhile looking into.

The lack of systemization and the specific position of contemporary Chinese art are confirmed by projects such as *40+4, Art is Not Enough! Not Enough!* by Davide Quadrio, founder of BizArt in Shanghai. Together with a number of partners, he tried to give an overview of the Shanghai art scene by interviewing 40 artists. In the book of this project, Davide Quadrio explains how difficult it was initially to find a location to open a gallery in Shanghai. The book lists a series of exhibitions that were planned and rapidly closed down by the authorities, even in today's Shanghai.

It was only at the beginning of the new millennium that the Moganshanlu art area was officially approved, and other areas followed later. This was around the same time as the opening of the 798 Art Zone in Beijing, which reflects the controlling hand of the government.

In 2007, BizArt created an international platform in Hong Kong (http://arthubasia.org).[9] For many years, the bookshop-publisher Timezone 8, owned by Robert Bernell in the 798 Art Zone in Beijing, offered a good collection of books on contemporary Chinese art. Although the majority of these books were in English with only a limited selection in Chinese, and in spite of the fact they did not have any systematic collection or stock, it was still one of the rare places to find material on contemporary Chinese art. Unfortunately the bookshop suddenly disappeared in 2012 and was turned into a sushi-bar. The only reminder of the former occupant is two bookshelves decorating the wall.

In recent years, official museums for contemporary art on Mainland China, such as the Today Art Museum (Jinri Meishuguan) in Beijing, have opened bookshops, but again

books focusing on contemporary art are limited. Online initiatives, such as Artlinkart,[10] Artbaba,[11] and Laboratory Art Beijing[12] hugely help to structure the information flow.

Although many artist areas and galleries have now opened, material on art remains very dispersed. On Mainland China, it never seems to be clear what is possible or what the limits are, or rather these limits are in constant flux. The tension between government control and bottom up innovative initiatives is discussed in the section on the post-socialist condition in this book.

Secondly, I want to comment on the use of language in art criticism. I believe this mirrors the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art on the one hand, and on the other, it can also be seen as a core reason for why Eurocentrism continues to control the art market.

Art criticism in China has developed along with the internationalization of Chinese art. Not only has the style and method of criticism changed with the development of contemporary Chinese art, but also the language used. In the material studied for this book, I found that language use reflected the change in the global position of contemporary Chinese art over the past decades.

Materials from the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s are only written in Chinese, and very little material from that time exists in other languages. This implies that knowledge about the new evolutions in the 1980s, for instance, is mainly accessible in Chinese and therefore only available to those who can read Mandarin. This may be one of the reasons why insight into what happened in the 1980s on the Chinese art scene is limited and poorly documented in the West, and that simplistic rhetoric about Chinese art in Western criticism persists. In light of this, translation projects like those at the AAA are of major importance.

A number of artists' statements and articles published in Chinese in *Meishu* during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were translated into other languages and published in other contexts. This limited translated material became the source material for Western critics and consequently the same articles, the same quotes and the same references by Chinese critics such as Li Xianting, were used over and over again, while the majority of publications on innovation in Chinese art were neglected. In some cases, art criticism of Chinese contemporary art was very superficial with critics seemingly copying each other's views. The comments relating to Political Pop artists were uniform to such an extent that one might question the value of art criticism at all. This results in a disconnection between Western criticism on Chinese art and the reality inside China.

The situation changed from the mid-1990s onwards after Deng Xiaoping made his trip to the South of China in 1992 and internationalization and commercialization really took off. Material from the late 1990s and more recently is often published in multiple languages: in Chinese as well as English, French, Japanese, German, Dutch, Hebrew, Czech and many others. This shows the internationalization of the contemporary Chinese art scene. Many of today's books on contemporary art in China are bilingual (Chinese and English). Some critics, like Gao Minglu, almost systematically publish everything in Chinese and English. The magazine *Yishu*, established in 2002, is one example of an English language magazine produced in close cooperation between the Chinese and non-Chinese.

The language gap certainly influences the relationship between Chinese artists and the global art scene and makes it difficult for Chinese artists to connect with the global art world. Many Chinese artists do not speak English well enough to be able to engage in serious discussions and few Westerners involved in the contemporary Chinese art scene speak Chinese. Many Chinese artists cannot read the criticism written about their work in other languages.

The structure of the book

This book contextualizes contemporary Chinese art from various viewpoints.

After exploring general East–West relations with Eurocentrism, Sinocentrism, and mutual perceptions and the interaction between the local and the global in the first chapter, the book then focuses on art.

The second chapter introduces the general evolutions in art in China during recent decades. It describes the main trends and movements in Chinese contemporary art and investigates the explorative atmosphere of the late 20th century. This chapter also introduces the artists we will focus on and provides the background against which they and their work can be positioned. We investigate the complexity of the contemporary Chinese art context via the position and work of artists who participated in the 1993 Venice Biennale. Throughout the book, I often allow the artists to speak; therefore it contains a lot of quotes.

The third chapter focuses on China as a post-socialist state. It investigates the socio-political and the economic system in China, describing the overall context in which art is created, exhibited, communicated and marketed.

In the fourth chapter, we investigate the post-traditional condition and explore the relationship of contemporary Chinese art with China's traditions.

Finally, the fifth chapter deals with the post-colonial condition of contemporary Chinese art located between China and the West. Art history, as we generally perceive it and deal with it, is strongly based on a dominant Western canon. How does Chinese art find a place in this?

The interactions and tensions between these three conditions help us to explore what is at play and will enable us to unravel the complexity.

The appendix provides a list of illustrations, a glossary of Chinese names, a glossary of the Chinese titles of artworks depicted in the book, and a glossary of Chinese terms in pinyin and Chinese characters. An extensive overview of the consulted bibliography is listed for the motivated reader.

Practical note on the use of Chinese characters and transcription

In this book Chinese expressions and terms are written in pinyin between brackets. A glossary of Chinese characters is provided in the appendix.

Chinese names are also written in pinyin, with the exception of a few names that have become familiar in another transcription such as the case of Sun Yat-sen. In such cases, the glossary of Chinese characters also provides the pinyin transcription. Since this book mainly focuses on Mainland China, simplified characters are used in the glossary and in the bibliography.

1 Lü Peng, 2010, pp. 1012–1013.

2 Driessen, Mierlo, van, eds., 1997, p 51.

3 Wang Lin, "Conceptual Art and the China Experience", *Contemporary*, Vol 3, issue 1, 2000 http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume3issue1/feature.htm (consulted: 19/12/2010).

4 Zhu Qi, "The Internationalization of Chinese Contemporary Art: Post-Colonial Production and Localization" *(Dangdai yishu de guojihua zhi lu: hou zhimin shengchan yu pentuhua)* in: *Jin ri meishu/ Art Today*, 2008, 36, Cultural Conflicts in China (Zhongguo de wenhua chongtu), Prince Claus Fund Journal, nr 15, p 35.

5 http://arthubasia.org/archives/the-last-two-decades-revisited-in-shanghai/ (Consulted 6/07/2010).

6 http://www.ucca.org.cn/

7 http://www.artresearchcenter.org/HomePageEnglish.asp

8 www.aaa.org.hk

9 Quadrio Davide, 2008, p 36.

10 www.artlinkart.com

11 www.art-ba-ba.com

12 www.bjartlab.com

Sun Liang, *Moon Tattoo*, 1996, oil on canvas, 180 x 120cm © Courtesy of Sun Liang ►

Chapter 1
Chinese art in East and West

1.1 Introduction

In order to contextualize contemporary Chinese art, we need to look at the interaction between China and the West and the tensions deriving from that, and we must consider a number of 'post'-statuses or 'post'-conditions of China today.

With the opening up of China in 1978, Maoist ideology came to an end. The Chinese version of socialism underwent comprehensive change and China moved into the post-socialist era. However, this post-socialist era not only builds on the former socialist legacy, it also encompasses many of China's traditions.

When the Chinese Empire ended at the beginning of the 20th century, China has also gone through major changes, reevaluating its traditions in light of modernization and emancipation. But in spite of all change, traditions were never fully overthrown or abolished. Attempts to do this during the Cultural Revolution were unsuccessful. Since the 1980s a rediscovery and revival of traditions in a modernized form is ongoing in post-traditional China. The Chinese also continue to refer to the Opium War, which they consider the starting point for China's modernization. This invites us to investigate China and Chinese art also in the light of post-colonialism.

Each of these post-statuses has an influence on the tension and interaction between China and the West, and on the acceptance and appreciation of Chinese contemporary art at global scale. In many ways the global art world continues to be dominated by Western powers and although the world is changing and power relations are shifting, contemporary art from China and many other non-Western areas does not yet receive full recognition. To contextualize contemporary Chinese art we need to encompass the local post-socialist, post-traditional and post-colonial conditions and to explore the global dimension.

We will first look at how these issues play on a theoretical level, and then investigate how they play out in practice in the art world. As a case study, we focus on the Chinese

artists who participated in the 1993 Venice Biennale. The selection of these Chinese artists by Achille Bonito Oliva and the reaction to that selection in China is a prime example of Eurocentrism. The impact of Oliva's selection of Chinese artworks and the way they were presented at the Biennale was, however, highly influential on the general Western perception of contemporary Chinese art. For many Westerners, it was their first confrontation with contemporary Chinese art and Oliva's selection was taken as representative of what was going on in China at the time.

The participation of Chinese artists in the Venice Biennale had a deep impact on the careers and artistic choices of these artists, because many of them had never been outside China before. In retrospect, the artists see that what was at stake was not limited to their personal position, but rather a reflection of the overall climate at the time.

We will focus on these artists to explore the complexity of their participation in the Venice Biennale and the general confrontation of Chinese contemporary art with the West. Achille Bonito Oliva received a lot of criticism in China at the time for his Eurocentric approach. The reason for this was linked to his selection of rather similar artworks by artists who actually created work in a wide variety of styles.

1.2 China: Post-socialist

When Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949 the country drastically changed. With the introduction of the socialist system, China became a planned economy. The Chinese Communist Party imposed the standards of Socialist Realism on Chinese art, literature and culture, particularly in the period between 1949 and 1978, leaving little room for experimentation and individual creativity. Mao Zedong had already presented the standards to which art in a socialist society had to conform during a conference at Yan'an in 1942. By 1949, these standards were institutionalized. Artists were members of Artists Associations, and the Communist Party prescribed the rules for art both in form and ideological content. Every step of the art world, from

art production to exhibition, came under Party control. There was no commercial art market during this period.

The year 1978 marked the beginning of a new period for China and for Chinese art. The end of Maoism also marked the end of socialism as Mao and the Chinese Communist Party had initially conceived it. China reformed economically, but not politically. With the 'socialist economy with Chinese characteristics' China moved into a state of post-socialism. Consequently, contemporary Chinese art developed within a climate where the economy was increasingly market-oriented, but in the political constellation of the People's Republic of China led by the Chinese Communist Party.

After opening up, China's interaction with the West intensified. The relationship between the two changed, but it remains very complex. While economic interaction has grown tremendously, politically China continues its centralist system with one center of authority, which the West has difficulty accepting. With opening up, not only did the relationship between China and the West change but also the relationship between the Chinese state and the individual. Consequently, the relationship between individual artists and governmental art institutions and control also changed.

The post-1978 era in which Chinese contemporary art blossomed can be considered post-socialist. China has modernized, but the one-party state with one dominant political discourse remains in place. The contextualization of contemporary art in China demands that we consider this condition. With the change of economy, Chinese art could become part of the global art market and integrate into the global system. This resulted in a situation where on the one hand, art in China could be created in the context of one party retaining control, and on the other, it suddenly gained commercial value. Almost overnight, artists such as Fang Lijun or Wang Guangyi moved from a context in which their art had no commercial value to becoming hugely successful artists at global level, or as Fang Lijun puts it, from having little to eat to earning huge sums for their work.

1.3 China: Post-traditional

We cannot ignore the fact that China has its own ancient aesthetic framework. Although fundamental changes have taken place in the field of art in the 20th century, Chinese artists continue to draw on their own tradition and ideologies. Aesthetics and art in China are traditionally linked to a cosmic worldview where all things are interrelated and where one force, *dao* is at work. Like everything else, man is part of this system, just as art and aesthetics are part of it. Throughout the ages and until today, art critics in China have said 'art is *dao, dao* is art'.[1] Especially painting – traditionally the highest art – is associated with *dao*: 'painting is art' reflected in the '*dao* of painting'. To be able to judge aesthetic quality, the art critic needs to understand these traditional aesthetic principles. In this respect, Chinese artists and art critics have always underlined a sense of movement in the picture produced through 'spirit resonance' (*qi yun*).

In the 5th century, Xie He formulated the Six Principles or Six Canons (*liu fa*) for the appreciation of painting in *Old Record of the Classification of Painters (Gu hua pin lu)*. These principles have been passed down through the ages until today. The Six Principles Xie He formulated are: 1. Circulation of the *qi* (Breath, Spirit, Vital Force of Heaven) produces movement of life; 2. Brush creates structure; 3. According to the object draw its form; 4. According to the nature of the object apply color; 5. Organize composition with the elements in their proper places; 6. In copying, seek to pass on the essence of the master's brush and methods.[2]

The resonance or circulation of *qi (qi yun)* in art was the first principle for Xie He. During the Five Dynasties, the Six Essentials *(liu yao)* were formulated in the *Record for Painting Method (Bi fa ji)*. When Zhang Yanyuan commented on the principles of Xie He in *A Record of the Famous Painters of All the Dynasties (li dai ming hua ji)* during the Tang Dynasty, he interpreted the *qi yun* as the essential manifestation of *dao*. This is the spiritual force that connects the artist with the cosmic principle. The

understanding of concepts like *dao, yin* and *yang* and *qi yun* in art has been the subject of observations, criticism and interpretation until today. This philosophical background inspired the techniques and composition methods used in ink painting. The idea of the unity of opposites, for instance, results in techniques like the use of void, heaven and earth, host and guest, and others.

This Chinese aesthetic framework is useful for the assessment of traditional Chinese art. For the appreciation of contemporary Chinese artworks, this theoretical background could still offer a possible method for artworks deeply rooted in Chinese ink painting tradition such as some of the work by Gu Wenda, Qiu Zhijie, Yang Jiechang, and Wang Tiande. However, for the general assessment of contemporary Chinese art, purely traditional methods can no longer be applied. There is no doubt that contemporary Chinese art arose in the particular climate of recent historic conditions in China. These conditions are a mixture of foreign influences and specific Chinese ones. The opening up of China after the Cultural Revolution and the ideological vacuum succeeding it in the 1980s, resulted in heated debates in China about the future directions Chinese culture should take, with some people pleading for Westernization and others exploring China's tradition. The particular atmosphere of the time strongly influenced politics, economics, society and culture. These historic conditions gave rise to a liberal climate in which contemporary Chinese art could start to develop.

The new developments took place at a time when the strong institutionalization of art and culture was still a fact, and no commercial art market existed in China. The climate in which contemporary Chinese art came into being was specific to China and the transfer of Western concepts like 'avant-garde' or 'Pop Art', terms that originated in a Western context, ignore these conditions. At the same time, contemporary Chinese art came into being in close interaction with the global art scene. The interaction between Chinese conditions and international influences thus paved the way for contemporary Chinese art.

In conclusion, neither a purely Western theoretical framework (because it tends to ignore typical Chinese conditions) nor a purely Chinese one (because it neglects global influences on contemporary Chinese art) is sufficiently appropriate to the study of contemporary Chinese art. This highlights the need for contextualization of Chinese contemporary art, which is the goal of this book.

1.4 China: Post-colonial

Due to globalization, contemporary art from China has become part of the global art market. Therefore we need to consider the position of Chinese art between China and the West. In recent times, Chinese art critics have repeatedly reacted against Western dominance in the field of contemporary art. The art critic Guan Yuda has strongly criticized the *'85 New Wave* exhibition shown at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, which opened its doors in 2007 in the Dashanzi 798 Art Zone. "As soon as you walk in you get this unspeakable flavor of decay, like in a morgue, it does not have any historical, nor any documentary value. Everything is 'yuppie-ized', and 'sacretized'".[3]

The art critic Pan Xinglei states that China has seen the depths of "the hypocrisy of 'Mr. Democracy' and the treachery of 'Mr. Science'". Pan Xinglei criticizes the creation of Art Zones like Dashanzi 798 in Beijing and concludes that 'after the political, military, and economic colonization' of China by the West, now 'art colonization' follows.[4]

Pan Xinglei's criticism makes us look into China's recent history with its subcolonial state and later post-colonial condition. Since the Opium War in 1840, China was confronted with the military power of Western nations. Consequently the Chinese, concerned with 'saving the nation' (*jiu guo*) engaged in the politics of 'strengthening themselves' (*ziqiang yundong*). Nineteenth century reform-minded intellectuals Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were aware of the need to modernize, but their ideas were still deeply rooted in Confucian tradition. China, forced to reevaluate its cultural and

socio-political system, was on the one hand fascinated by and wanted to learn from the West, but on the other contemptuous of the military aggression of imperial powers.

Sun Yat-sen (*Sun Zhongshan*), the first president of the Chinese Republic established in 1911 after the fall of the Chinese Empire, formulated a more radical program to modernize China. He argued that although China was not really colonized, it was in a state worse than being colonized; it was a kind of 'subcolony' (*ci zhimin*) vulnerable to the whims of several foreign nations. He proposed a program with three goals (*sanmin zhuyi*): the Principle of Nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*) a reaction against foreign control, Power of the People (*minquan zhuyi*) a gradual implementation of democracy, and Livelihood of the People (*minsheng zhuyi*) a social economic program.

The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries in China were marked by radical political, legal, social, educational and cultural changes. After World War I at the Treaty of Versailles conference in 1919, the Chinese expected to recover the territorial rights over the Chinese province Shandong from Germany and Austria. However, Western powers wanted to transfer them to Japan, and the Chinese took to the streets to protest. Protests in Beijing led to the May Fourth Movement, which stirred nationalist consciousness and became a beacon of modernization and the symbol of Chinese emancipation.

The expressions 'Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy' Pan Xinglei uses refer to the May Fourth period when intellectuals like Chen Duxiu, Cai Yuanpei, Lu Xun and Hu Shi reacted against imperial Confucian traditions and pleaded for a new Chinese culture (*Xin wenhua yundong*) inspired by Western standards, especially science and democracy. Cai Yuanpei, the newly appointed Minister of Education and Culture in the Chinese Republic appealed for an open attitude towards the West and promoted the implementation of a modernized education system incorporating Western science and methodology. In the newly established magazine *La Jeunesse/Xin qingnian* in 1915, Chen Duxiu advocated independent thinking and called for the replacement of Mr. Confucius by Mr. Science

and Mr. Democracy. China went through a period of intense change, emancipation and modernization. The events during this period reflect the complex nature of the relationship the Chinese had with the West.

Major changes took place throughout China at the beginning of the 20th century, also in the field of art. It was in this climate that formal art education was introduced. Although oil painting had already been introduced into China during the Ming dynasty, it was only now that art academies were set up with oil painting as a discipline. This period was deeply influenced by artists such as Liu Haisu who advocated Western art methods and oil painting and who helped to introduce Western art in China by translating the biographies of Western artists. Liu Haisu also incorporated live figure drawing into the art curriculum, including nudes, something that had never existed in the ink painting tradition. Many Chinese artists including Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian went to study abroad in places like Paris and had a major influence on the development of oil painting in China. Naturally, a tension existed between those who wanted to modernize by seeking inspiration in the West and those who wanted to preserve China's tradition.

In 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong stressed the fact that a new period for China had arrived and that the Chinese people could stand up again, awakened, liberated from and organized against imperialism and Chiang Kai-shek, the running dog of imperialism. A new China was born. This spirit was also reflected in the People's Republic's National Anthem that begins with: Arise! (*Qilai!*).

The period between the Opium War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China is now referred to as the 'century of humiliation' (*bainian guochi*). Mao Zedong secured his place in history because he succeeded in reunifying China after a century of war and civil war. He is praised for enabling the Chinese people 'to stand up' again after the humiliating period in confrontation with the West.

During the 'century of humiliation' China was not fully colonized but the struggle for survival against the aggression of imperial powers left deep scars and there is no doubt that post-colonial rhetoric strongly affects research on China today. While China's power is growing enormously in the world, the burden of the legacy of the 'subcolonial' state has not yet been removed.

Post-colonial theorists such as Edward Said (1978), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Homi Bhabha (1990) and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) have reacted against Eurocentrism with its binary oppositions like center/margin, north/south, east/west, enlightened/ignorant, civilized/primitive, nations/tribes, religions/superstitions, culture/folklore, art/artifacts, and its overall simplification and generalization of the approach to post-colonial areas. Scholars researching Asia such as Kishore Mahbubani (1997), Naoki Sakai (1997), and de Bary (2007) have taken part in that post-colonial debate and have pinpointed Eurocentrism in the study of Asia in various domains. In the study of China, post-colonial notions and definitions have also been applied.

Post-colonial scholars such as Stuart Hall (1988), Rey Chow (2000), Shohat and Stam (1994), and Naoki Sakai (1997) have also reacted against the use of ethnic prefixes. But while various researchers have argued that reference to ethnic identity evokes associations with racism or dominance, Chinese artists and art critics seem to have persistently used these prefixes in reference to China and Chinese culture specifically. This results in a situation where on the one hand the Chinese have reacted against Western dominance and on the other, have ostentatiously profiled themselves as being Chinese and by doing so have erected a barrier between China and the rest of the world or between Chinese culture and other cultures.

It is interesting to discover the myriad of terms the Chinese have used to describe apparently typical Chinese features.[5] All these terms seem to refer to aspects that distinguish Chinese culture from other cultures. Thus, while Eurocentrism can be detected in Western discourse, Sinocentrism can be detected in Chinese discourse.

1.5 Discourse, constructs, and limits of theory

The post-colonial context of Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism is at play at various levels of discourse and in the use of concepts. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said raised awareness of how Western discourse is used in writing about Asia to serve the political and economic interests of Western colonizing powers in the East. Chen Xiaomei's *Occidentalism* analyzes the image of the Modern West in post-Mao China. In her analysis of Chinese literature, poetry, theater and the documentary *River Elegy (Heshang)*, Chen Xiaomei concludes that Occidentalism is at work in two different discourses: the 'official Occidentalism' and 'anti-official Occidentalism'. The image of the Modern West serves different agendas. In 'official Occidentalism' the Chinese government uses the image of the Western other to support Chinese nationalism. During Mao Zedong's reign, the capitalist West was the enemy against which China needed to be protected. In 'anti-official Occidentalism', used by opponents of the Chinese government, the Western other was a metaphor for political liberation from the ideological suppression within a totalitarian society.[6]

The research of Edward Said and Chen Xiaomei shows that both the 'Occident' and the 'Orient' are constructs, created by individuals or groups to serve a variety of purposes. But also concepts like 'Europe', 'China' and many others can be considered constructs created to serve different goals.

The term 'West' is not necessarily referring to the geographical location of countries in the West, but may also include Australia, which is in fact part of the 'East'. In the same way, 'Eurocentrism' does not necessarily refer to 'Europe' but may also include the US and other areas. For Raymond Williams, the 'West' is overlaid with a long, sedimented history of ambiguous usage, going back to the West/East division of the Roman Empire, the West (Judeo-Christian)/East (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist) division of the Christian Church, and the post-war division of Europe into the capitalist West and the communist East.[7] Jan Pieterse refers to 'stations' of European progress in which

Greece, Rome, Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment are nothing but "moments of cultural mixing".[8] The 'West' is thus a myth, a construction, not only created by Westerners but also by the Chinese as analyzed by Chen Xiaomei. In the same fashion, 'China' turns out to be a vague concept. Geographically, China can refer to Mainland China or to Greater China including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and overseas territories. Different Chinas have been constructed through history. Marco Polo was one of the first Westerners to document China in the 13th century and his chronicles have fascinated generations of Europeans. In the 18th century, Montesquieu wrote about China in *Persian Letters* referring to China's particular way of thinking, family constructions, to Confucian values and ancestor worship. His description of China influenced European understanding of the country.[9] The Western image of China has changed over the centuries, fluctuating between disdain and respect and admiration. Different Westerners construct different Chinas. Sinologists tend to see the Chinese Empire as the golden age and Communism as an un-Chinese experiment epitomized by the Cultural Revolution. Journalists tend to look at China from a mainly political point of view or from the point of view of human rights. The analysis of China by post-structuralists like Michel Foucault or Roland Barthes has been criticized by Chinese researchers for its imagined, oversimplified and generalized depiction of China due to a lack of deeper understanding. Michel Foucault opens his book *The Order of Things* with a categorization taken from a "certain Chinese encyclopedia". According to Shen Ning, the book Foucault refers to is nothing more than a fictional novel wrongly assumed to be an historical record.[10] 'China' is also a construction for the Chinese. Among the Chinese there seems to be a deep-rooted conviction that only the Chinese can understand Chinese culture and China. China studies the way non-Chinese interpret and understand China. Mo Dongyin wrote *The History of Sinology*, which deals with the way Europe looks at China throughout history, from the first dynasty of the Chinese Empire in 221 BC until the 20th century.[11]

Not only are general terms referring to areas or cultures problematic, but also terms describing art. New Chinese art during the 1980s is often identified as 'avant-garde' (*qianwei, xianfeng*). Both Chinese and Western critics have pointed out that when used in a Chinese context this term has a different meaning to the original one derived from Euro-American modernism.[12] Gao Minglu remarks that the term 'avant-garde' formally used since the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989 differs from the Chinese title of the exhibition *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan* using the term 'modern'/*xiandai* instead of 'avant-garde'/*qianwei*.

Where the Euro-American term implies the separation of aesthetics and politics, the Chinese version implies a unity of the aesthetic and the social.[13] Wu Hung formulates an alternative: "… it is only natural that this art cannot be interpreted according to a ready-made Western model". He therefore proposes to use 'experimental art' (*shiyan yishu*), rather than 'avant-garde'.[14] The Italian art historian Iovane Giovanni, aware of the fact that including non-Western art in the Venice Biennale would demand a more open view towards art in general, concluded that Western theories and terminologies might be inadequate to address non-Western art: "… introducing artists of the Chinese Pavilion, at this 47th Venice Biennale, obliges us (…) to fully perceive the inadequacy of our words. Terms such as 'Magic Realism' or 'Hyper-realism' are surely not enough (…) Let us leave aside critical philology (and all the historically arbitrariness in it), sociology, political correctness, the repertoire of Western styles and even the ingenious nostalgia from the forms and manners of the other (almost one thousand years have passed since Marco Polo)."[15]

The terms modernism and postmodernism are problematic in the Chinese context. In the decade after the opening up, modernism was used as a strategy to oppose Maoism and postmodernism can be seen as a reaction against modernism in China's reality that was also post-socialist. The introduction of postmodernism in China was accompanied by heated debates in the 1980s questioning the role of the artist, but

the specific Chinese context of these debates needs to be considered. Artists were not only confronted with the importation of international concepts, they questioned their everyday lives in the changing post-socialist reality. I follow Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong in the division between 'postmodernism in China' and 'Chinese postmodernism'. Postmodernism as an import from the West was introduced into China during the 1980s as part of the globalization process with China becoming part of the global market. But in China it was only known to limited circles of literary and art critics and it remained a foreign and technical term transferred from a Western to Chinese context. Chinese postmodernism, however, relates to everyday life in China, in an economic, political and social context of 'coexistence of a precapitalist, capitalist and post-socialist'[16] as 'a producer of a culture of the postmodern'.[17] The confrontation with rapid changes in everyday life in the decades following the opening up created an unsettled climate with a daily reconfiguring of the preexisting Maoist context. In art this resulted in an aesthetic exploration linked to the post-socialist reality. The engagement of artists with society must therefore not only be viewed in the context of postmodernism, but also appreciated in the complex post-socialist context.

The complexity at the theoretical level described above, is mirrored in art practices. Eurocentrism continues to have influence on the level of institutions, curators, critics, and in the overall Western-dominated art scene.

A brief look into some art practices of non-Western art in the West will confirm this. When Chinese artists were invited to the 1993 Venice Biennale, all these issues were at stake.

1.6 Non-Western art in the West

Since 1978, Chinese artists had longed for a place in the global art scene. Interactions between contemporary Chinese art and the international art scene were still limited in the 1980s. This was not only due to the fact that China, even after the opening up, was

still relatively closed off. It also related to the general lack of interest in the Western art world towards non-Western art practices.

In the last decades of the 20th century, the question of cultural representation slowly but surely became a topic of discussion in the West with a critique of the Eurocentric colonial attitude. In 1984–1985, the MoMa organized the exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* presenting the 'discovery' of non-Western cultural production by Western art at the beginning of the 20th century. The exhibition displayed masks, totems and other objects from Africa, South America, and Polynesia in juxtaposition with modern and contemporary Western art.

In 1989, another exhibition *Magicien de la terre* in Paris curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and Mark Francis can be seen as a milestone in changing curating practices. Rather than juxtaposing the primitive with the modern, the curatorial team of *Magicien de la Terre* wanted to present art from different global regions on an equal footing. For *Magicien de la terre* the term 'artist' was replaced by the term 'magician'. Nevertheless, the show was still criticized for exoticizing non-Western art practices and for its neocolonialist attitude. But by including non-Western art practices in the Western art context it was one of the first exhibitions to pave the way towards curatorial practice beyond previously established Western centers of art production. In *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* Paul O'Neil describes this as the curator becoming a global author.[18]

A few years later, in 1993, Chinese artists from Mainland China were invited to the Venice Biennale. Although a few Chinese artists had already participated in *Magicien de la Terre* and other exhibitions on contemporary art, it was only in 1993 that Chinese art was shown in places like Hong Kong and Berlin.[19] The Venice Biennale was the first time in history that Chinese contemporary art was placed in an international context alongside artworks from other areas. This was a major step for Chinese art in becoming part of the global art scene, but as we shall see, problematized by Eurocentrism in the art world.

1.7 The Venice Biennale in post-colonial times

Since its establishment, the Venice Biennale has been inspired by the idea of nations and nationalism. The idea of 'national art' has become problematic in times of globalization. Artists search for cross-boundary identities and art languages that cannot be reduced to or confined within the field of the national. From the statements of curators and art historians below we can detect a growing awareness of the need for an equal footing.

Germano Celant, curator of the Venice Biennale in 1997, recognizes the problem of Eurocentrism: "This Venetian institution was born of the 19th century idea of territorial control, defined by boundaries between nations. The constructions of the pavilions is linked to a political-diplomatic territorialization that seeks to distinguish art by national configurations. With the fluctuation of boundaries today, this mapping is in a state of crisis, because it excludes the sorts of overlapping and spillage typical of art, which is always tending to transcend order, identity, separations. The artist belongs not to a nation, but to the history of art and artists, to a community that has always rebelled against all limits." [20]

In 2001, Harald Szeemann voices the desire for the "breaking of the Biennale's self-imposed rules" to make room for non-Western artists such as the Chinese. He wants to break down age boundaries and national ghettos to make it possible to integrate a considerable number of Chinese artists and to present their works as autonomous rather than as 'exotic'.[21] A year later in 2002, Okwui Enwezor, artistic director of Documenta 11 in Kassel argued for replacing the grand narratives through new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation and a search for new ways of reading the global entanglement as being post-colonial in its very nature.[22]

Many curators question Eurocentrism in art, but decades after *Magicien de la terre* the problem persists. In 2011, Paola Baratta, president of the Venice Biennale foundation, defended the use of national pavilions: "Individual national pavilions are a very important feature of the Venice Biennale. It is an old formula and yet one that is more vital than ever.

It is precious in times of globalization, because it gives us the primary fabric of reference on which the always new, always varied, autonomous geographies of the artist can be observed and better highlighted." [23] She points out how collateral events to the Biennale can serve to demonstrate 'cultural identity'. In 2011, this was the case in *Future Pass – From Asia to the West*, an exhibition set up by Victoria Lu (Lu Rongzhi) including many Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Pakistani and Indian artists.[24] Appointing the 'margins' of the Venice Biennale as a space to demonstrate cultural identity seems ironic.

Reaction to concepts such as the Venice Biennale also comes from artists. The contribution of the Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu to the 2011 Venice Biennale adds to this discussion. On the outside of the Romanian pavilion he writes on the wall:

20% of reasons not to be here:

- Invisibility is resistance
- Not to decorate the gardens of the white male
- Because Jan Verwoert said: "Forget the national" and we like him
- Venice Biennale = showroom of Western hegemony
- Guilt
- Not to jeopardize our place on the barricades
- Art = Revolution = Spectacle = Capital
- Because we are 1 communist + 1 socialist feminist
- Antinomadism
- Venice Biennale is a choking-on-money mercantilist fossil
- The Zoo effect
- We have nothing to wear for the opening
- It's easier to criticize a show when you are not in it
- The curse of boosted expectations (the 2nd novel syndrome)
- To keep off who's hot & who's not
- Tourist menu sucks
- To make art the way we feel, without considering its potential to succeed.

Since the 1990s, the inclusion of non-Western art in a globalizing art world has grown. In recent decades, biennales have become an often-used vehicle for international and transnational exhibitions. Paul O'Neil argues that the format of the biennale has now become the default exhibition model across the world. Its capacity as a promotion tool for nations and city branding makes it irresistible to cultural policy makers.[25] At the *Sites of Construction* conference in Hong Kong in 2013, John Clark criticizes the use of biennales in which he sees the same curators, the same artists and even the same artworks recurring.

1.8 Chinese artists in Passage to the East in Venice 1993

In spite of post-colonial attitudes, the Chinese were more than happy to be invited to the West. The 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing had been a major event in the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art. The year 1993, however, was the real great leap forward.

In 1992, the political and economic situation in China had again changed when Deng Xiaoping made his famous trip to the South of China. Deng Xiaoping traveled to Shenzhen and Shanghai to stimulate the Chinese to be more ambitious in their economic development. His speeches gave a new impulse to China's economy. This had far-reaching consequences for the Chinese art scene. During the 1980s and most of the 1990s a commercial art market had been absent in China and there were no private art galleries. The concept of art having a commercial value was largely unknown to Chinese artists at the time. After Deng Xiaoping's trip, exhibitions could be held again, magazines were printed anew. But more importantly, the role of the government changed. A reduction in government subsidies implied a move away from government control towards an active promotion of the art market. In the catalogue of the 1993 *China Art Expo*, Qu Runhai, the Head of the Art Bureau of the Ministry of Culture states: "In staging this event, *China Art Expo*, mindful of its aims of fostering artistic creation and nurturing the art market, has departed from the past formula of drawing

exclusively on state funding, and has encouraged artists, art colleges, art galleries and museums to participate together. This is designed to present a total picture of the Chinese art scene, and to induce overseas artists to participate in this exchange, thereby encouraging and activating the Chinese art market." [26]

Not only a commercialization of art took place, but also a growing connection with the global art scene. Exhibitions of Chinese art were organized in Hong Kong and Berlin and the Venice Biennale invited Mainland Chinese artists to participate.

In January 1993, Johnson Chang Tsong-zung, director of the Hanart T.Z. Gallery in Hong Kong with the help of Beijing art critic and curator Li Xianting, and co-curator Oscar Ho, director of the Hong Kong Arts Centre, organized the exhibition *China's New Art: Post-89* in Hong Kong. Some 200 works by 50 artists were exhibited including paintings, sculpture, and installations, predominantly belonging to the Political Pop and the Cynical Realism movements. The influential role of the Hong Kong exhibition's curators in the recognition of artists and the internationalization of Chinese art was fully acknowledged: "Credit for recognizing the trend of Chinese Political Pop goes to Li Xianting, who, along with Johnson Chang, viewed and gathered these works in China. Most of these pieces had never been exhibited, even in their homeland, since the tightly-controlled gallery and museum network would not begin to consider showing such avant-garde works." [27] The curators divided the works into six categories: Political Pop Art with Wang Guangyi; Cynical Realism: Irreverence and Malaise with Fang Lijun and Liu Wei; Wounded Romantic Spirit with Zhang Xiaogang and Ding Fang showing a sense of 'tragedy and martyrdom' in their work; Emotional Bondage: Fetishism and Sado-Masochism with Zeng Fanzhi and Cai Jin who 'instead of transcending their wounds, transferred them into fetish obsession'; Rituals and Purgation: Endgame Art with Xu Bing and Gu Wenda showing an 'apocalyptic strain' or a 'ritual exercise'; Introspection and Retreat into Formalism: New Abstract Art where artists were preoccupied by formal considerations, with Ding Yi whose

attention was 'totally consumed by gauzes of colors, which were more mesmerizing than meditative'.[28]

At the 2013 *Sites of Construction* conference in Hong Kong, Johnson Chang motivated his interest in what was going on in the field of art in China as a personal interest from an art history point of view.

Also in January 1993, the exhibition *China Avant-Garde* in Haus der Kulturen in Berlin was organized. The curators were the German artists Andreas Schmid (who studied Chinese in Beijing and who was an art student at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art) and Jochen Noth (an activist in the German Communist student movement who went to China in 1979 and spent about 10 years there), and the Dutch artist Hans Van Dijk (who had lived in China since 1986). The exhibition later went on tour and introduced Chinese art to the European public. More than half of the Chinese artists presented in Berlin had also participated in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing in 1989: Ding Yi, Geng Jianyi, Gu Dexin, Huang Yongping, Wang Guangyi, Wu Shanzhuan, Yu Youhan, Zhang Peili and Fang Lijun (who was still a student at the time). The other artists were Lin Yilin, Ni Haifeng, Wang Jinsong, Yan Peiming, Yu Hong, Zhao Bandi and Zhao Jianren. As well as exhibiting works by these artists, a number of other works were presented in the exhibition catalogue.[29] Franziska Koch discusses the political sensitivity of the Berlin exhibition on Chinese art. The year 1989 was an historical crux for both China and Germany. Political events and their impact made it difficult for the curators to work in China and may have influenced their choice of artists. In 1991, Jochen Noth stated that art with political connotations or dissident art was to be avoided.[30] Andreas Schmid confirms this in his passionate lecture at the *Sites of Construction* conference where he recalls the political sensitivity of the post-1989 era and the clandestine way of getting the artworks out of China.

Both the Hong Kong and Berlin exhibitions were curated from inside China, either by Chinese curators or by Western artists/curators who had lived in China for a long time and who were

well acquainted with the Chinese art scene. While the Hong Kong and Berlin exhibitions showed the latest developments in Chinese art, the participation of Chinese artists in Venice meant that Chinese artworks were placed in a wider context of international art and seen by a broader public that was not specifically interested in Chinese art, but art in general. This meant a lot for both the Chinese artists and critics who had long dreamt of connecting with the outside world. For most of the artists, the visit to Venice was the first time they had left China. It was their first confrontation with the West, with many aspects of Western art, with a Western public in a Western context. The experience not only had a profound influence on their perception of the West, but also on their individual artistic choices and their position as Chinese artists in the global art scene.

In state-controlled China exhibitions had always been under the strict control of the government and even if there had been major shifts during the 1980s, it was not until 1989 that the first large-scale independently curated art exhibition had been organized in an official Chinese institute.

In June 1985, the magazine *Meishu* no. 6 had introduced the 41st Venice Biennale in its 'Foreign Art Window', which was the first time a large overseas art exhibition had been reported on in contemporary China. Until then, the existence of large-scale international exhibitions in the West was relatively unknown in China.

Four editions later, and a century after the establishment of the Venice Biennale in 1895, Mainland China was invited to participate.

The title of the 1993 Venice Biennale was *The Cardinal Points of Art*. Chinese artists participated in the exhibition *Passage to the East (Dongfang zhi lu)*.[31]

1.9 Selecting Chinese artists for the 1993 Venice Biennale

In preparation for the 1993 Biennale, the Italian curator Achille Bonito Oliva traveled to China in 1992 in search of artists. Inside China, Francesca Dal Lago who worked at

the Italian Embassy at the time, accompanied him. The influence of various curators and critics, such as Li Xianting, one of the leading figures in the development of contemporary Chinese art during the 1980s, was felt in the choice of artists for Venice. But it was Achille Bonito Oliva, who made the final decision.

Achille Bonito Oliva's display of Chinese artwork at the Biennale was a major step for Chinese artists, who were longing to gain a foothold in the international art world.

Oliva explains his motivation as follows: "My main theme is that of cultural nomadism. At a time when countries are fragmenting and becoming involved in all sorts of nationalist struggles, I want to show how art, especially the visual arts, can transcend man-made and geographic boundaries, and how artists can set an agenda for co-operation and peaceful co-existence." [32]

In his introduction to the Venice Biennale catalogue he writes: "Rather than imposing a restrictive critical approach, 'The Cardinal Points of Art' acknowledges the cultural nomadism and the coexistence of the languages that have formed contemporary art (...) It is no longer possible to recognize the purity of a national nucleus: instead, we must acknowledge the positive contribution of a trans-nationality, of an intertwining of nations capable of producing cultural eclecticism and necessary interracial unity. (...) Eurocentric history with its concepts of justice and liberty produced puritan capitalism, counter-reformist Catholicism, the French, the Soviet and finally the Chinese revolution. All of this in the name of progress, on behalf of technological development and better living conditions, principles of a logo-centric culture, and arrogant builder of world transformation, colonization and post-colonization of nations undergoing a less expansionist modern development (...) If at the beginning of the century the European avant-garde vitalized the language of art by assuming models of faraway cultures, the exponents of these cultures are now conducting a reproductive operation, intercepting Western models to graft onto the immobile throne of their traditions. The avant-garde movements of the past displaced or manipulated primitive languages as a means of

adjusting to scientific discoveries, of demonstrating the advanced condition of that symbolic production." [33]

In spite of his good intentions to oppose Eurocentrism, Oliva's rhetoric depicting other cultures as 'immobile thrones of their traditions' with 'primitive languages' speaks for itself. When Oliva came to China to make his selection, Chinese artists and critics were worried about his Eurocentric perception of Chinese art and his lack of understanding of the Chinese context. In an interview with Oliva, Kong Changan, asks him why all the Chinese artists he chose were artists who were strongly influenced by Western art. Oliva answers that he wants to emphasize exchange: "Independence is also exchange. Each culture is the result of exchange, even in the West; there is not something that is really Western. In the same way that there is no question about high or low, because each culture surely has its independence." [34]

Lü Peng describes Oliva's view as follows: "There is a 'super art/*chaoji yishu*' in both Europe and America nowadays. Its typical characteristic is that the cultural agents around the artists noticeably appear. The monetary, symbolic value has crushed the concept of set, idealistic grades in which art used to be ranked." [35]

Did Oliva have a hidden agenda for presenting Chinese art to the Western world? Lü Peng concludes: "... the Chinese were not aware the Italian had his own agenda, which was to help advance an artistic system belonging to some power or power group. The Italian had had a fixed notion concerning contemporary Western art, which was structured within an accepted and intensified art system. And it was only within this art system that the value of works could be highly regarded. This system was controlled by various special interest groups and the anchor was but a temporary spokesperson for the art circle." [36] Lü Peng continues: "In Western eyes, China is the last bastion of East-West confrontation (even though the parties are not well matched) and a fossil of the Cold War (even though things are changing). Therefore, the Chinese artist (logically) is the product of the era of Mao Zedong and the bearer and the force resisting that ideology. Conversely, Chinese Political

Pop feigns to use orthodox images of the Cultural Revolution in order to slander orthodox political mythology, while Cynical Realism mocks hollow idealism with frivolous scenes of life. Chinese avant-garde art is therefore destined to be a contemporary resolution of the complex of the Mao era, and is the regional transformation of the avant-garde art of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe." [37]

Wang Lin in his article *Oliva is not the savior of Chinese art* criticizes Oliva's Eurocentrism: "Director of the 45th Venice Biennale Achille Bonito Oliva came to China to select Chinese artworks. Although the Chinese collector [Li Xianting] gave detailed material and pleaded to present a full picture of the contemporary conditions of Chinese avant-garde art, Oliva only chose what he was interested in: Political Pop and Cynical Realist art. (...) Li Xianting's reaction to this was: 'We cannot do anything about that, we have to follow their rules, because this is a Western exhibition'. (...) Oliva's curtailed choice was not only due to his coincidental and random coming into contact with Chinese contemporary art, but also due to Eurocentrism (*ouzhou zhongxin*) hidden in his judgment." [38]

Hou Hanru also expressed his concerns about a fair coexistence of Chinese art with Western art: "Why are those in charge of China's participation in the Venice Biennale, those who still hold to 'official' academic techniques and art concepts, also the ones chosen to express the personal plights of Chinese society? One of the reasons might be that their works simply convey the mental state of young people in Chinese reality with no ideals. It is a weak, cynical position to 'be against' official ideology. This is what Westerners who are caught in the stereotypical Cold War ideology and are interested in Chinese affairs could imagine or show as sympathetic. (...) Such works as those in the exhibition do not show that Oliva understood the artists' conceptual meanings. Yet he made a statement to the Western audience that he had been to China and his sphere of influence had already covered China. Then we have to ask the question. Is this really peaceful coexistence?" [39]

The artists who participated in the 1993 Biennale often have their own theories. According to Sun Liang, the Hong Kong Hanart gallery owner Johnson Chang had an influence on the development of Political Pop Art. "Oliva came to China accompanied by Francesca Dal Lago who worked at the Italian Embassy at the time. She contacted Li Xianting. It was Li Xianting together with Johnson Chang from Hong Kong who had most influence. It is a pity that much of the work shown in Venice was such crap because it influenced how the West looks at contemporary Chinese art today." [40]

Song Haidong notes: "For the 1993 Venice Biennale Oliva came to China. Francesca Dal Lago who worked at the Italian Embassy contacted Li Xianting, so he was the one who chose the artists." [41]

Looking back at 1992, Wang Ziwei remembers: "When we went to Venice we had absolutely no clue what Venice meant. If I had known, I might not have gone. I think the selection they showed there was absolute rubbish. Oliva did not understand anything about Chinese art. In fact, how we finally ended up in Venice was via Fei Dawei who had brought the head of Centre Pompidou to China in 1987. I remember very well we were having dinner together when he told me he had to make a list of interesting Chinese artists. That list was distributed in the West. Francesca Dal Lago had no impact. She was just a go-between. Oliva was obviously very powerful so he could do his thing." [42]

Zhang Peili comments: "1993 focused on painting, and in particular on China's 'political pop' and 'cynical realism'. The language of the artworks exhibited in that show was quite balanced, with certain works being similar to each other. By exhibiting them all together, and separated from the rest of the exhibition, their similarities appeared even stronger (...) In the 1993 Biennale there was a huge gap between Chinese art and the rest of the exhibition: it appeared as if Chinese artists were talking to each other, as if in an internal dialogue." [43]

These quotes show that Eurocentrism was at play in the selection of artists invited to Venice in 1993. Especially on the Chinese side there seems to be consensus amongst artists, curators and critics that the choice of who went to Venice in 1993 was inspired by Western dominance and did not reflect the variety in contemporary Chinese art existing at the time, but was a biased choice by the Western curator inspired by stereotypes.

1.10 Conclusion

This introductory chapter determines why we need to consider the context in which art happens to appreciate contemporary Chinese art. Firstly, it takes place in a society that has changed tremendously after the opening up of China in 1978, and therefore can be called post-socialist. Secondly, we must consider the post-traditional context of contemporary art in China where modernization has always been a balancing act between tradition and innovation. And thirdly, we must consider the post-colonial context that influences the interaction between the China and the West and continues to dominate the field of art.

Problems occur on various levels of theoretical discourse and art practices, in curatorship and selection, and in the institutional versus the individual artists. The selection of Chinese artworks for the 1993 Venice Biennale was criticized in China for being Eurocentric. Although the Chinese were very happy to be invited to Venice, concerns about presenting a biased image of what was happening in contemporary Chinese art existed from the beginning.

1 Zhou Jiyin, 2005, p 1.

2 This is a translation by Sze Mai-mai in his facsimile of the 1887–1888 Shanghai edition of *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting (Jieziyuan Huazhuan)*, 1679–1701. Sze Mai-mai lists a variety of translations of the First Principle of Chinese Painting by various authors, such as "Spirit-Resonance, which means vitality" (Acker), "Rhythmic Vitality or spiritual rhythm expressed in the movement of life" (Binyon), "Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement (Sirén), "The life-movement of the Spirit through the rhythm of things" (Okakura) and concludes that although these translations vary to some extent, they are intuitively in agreement. Sze, 1992, p 19.

3 Guan Yuda, 2008.1, p 167.

4 Pan Xinglei, 2006, p 8.

5 The terms *guoqing* (national characteristics), *zhongguode* ('Chineseness'), or *zhonghua yishu* (Chinese art – as distinguished from other art), and *guofeng* (national customs) are just a few examples.

6 Chen, 1995.

7 Williams, 1984.

8 Pieterse, "Unpacking the West: How European is Europe?" Unpublished, quoted in Shohat, Stam, 1994, p 14.

9 Matt K. Matsuda, 2007, pp. 69–88.

10 Sheng Ning, "Fact or Fiction? Another dissection of the structure and differentiation of the Chinese Dream/ *Rentong haishi xugou? Jiegou, jiegoude zhongguo meng zai pouxi*, 2001 www.cp.com.cn/emd/17/newsdetail.cfm?iCntno=845 (consulted 16/01/2009).

11 Mo Dongfang, 2006.

12 Gao Minglu, 2005, p 43; Koppel-Yang, 2003, p 22; Wu Hung, 2005, pp. 12–16.

13 Gao Minglu, 2005, p 45.

14 Wu Hung, 2005, p 15.

15 Iovane, in Celant 1997, p 607.

16 Dirlik, Zhang, 2000, p 3.

17 Dirlik, Zhang, 2000, p 399.

18 O'Neil, 2012, p 54.

19 Various video recordings of artists at work during the exhibition can be consulted on youtube, e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muWapxdPlqk

20 Celant, 1997, p xxii.

21 Szeemann, "The timeless, grand narration of human existence in its time", 2001, p ix.

22 O'Neil, 2012, p 59.

23 *ILLUMInations*, Catalog to the 54th Venice Biennale, 2011, p 32.

24 Curiger, 2011, p 32.

25 O'Neil, 2012, p 51.

26 Qu Runhai "Foster Artistic Creation and Develop Artistic Exchange", Chinese Art Expo, CAE, 1993, 11, pp. 16–25.

27 Cheng, 1993, p 43.

28 Doran, Chang, Li, 1993, pp. II–V.

29 Noth, Pohlmann, Reschke Kai, China Avant-Garde/*Zhongguo qianwei yishuzhan*, 1993.

30 Koch Franziska, "China" on Display for European Audiences? The Making of an Early Travelling Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art – China Avant-Garde (Berlin 1993): http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ojs/index.php/transcultural/article/view/9129/3103 (consulted: 2/01/2012).

31 La Biennale di Venezia, 45 Esposizione internazionale d'arte: Punti cardinali dell'arte, La Biennale di Venezia, Marsilio, Venice, 1993, p 492–1039 Vol II, Passagio a Oriente, "Nuova pittura cinese".

32 Hill, 1993, p 60.

33 Oliva, 1994, pp. 9–15.

34 Kong, 1993, p 14.

35 Lü Peng, 2002, p 154.

36 Lü Peng, 2002, p 153.

37 Lü Peng, 2010, p 1012.

38 Wang Lin, 1995, pp. 175–177.

39 Hou Hanru, in Lü Peng, 2002, p 154.

40 Jeanne Boden's interview with Sun Liang at his studio in Shanghai, close to People's Square on July 28, 2011.

41 Jeanne Boden's interview with Song Haidong in Shanghai, close to his home at Jinshajiang Lu, July 28, 2011.

42 Jeanne Boden's interview with Wang Ziwei in Shanghai, close to his home at Hengshan Lu, July 30, 2011.

43 Clark, 2000, p 241.

Geng Jianyi, *Face Made By Liquids*, 2000, chemigram, 50 x 30cm ►

Chapter 2
Chinese art going global

2.1 Introduction

New evolutions in art coincided with new evolutions in the socio-political system in China. The developments of the 1980s can be seen as a continuation of the emancipation movement during the May Fourth period. A general overview of what happened in the course of the 20th century provides the background against which we can position the individual artists of *Passage to the East* we discuss in this book.

This chapter introduces the main developments in Chinese art in recent times. It includes the socio-political and economic changes that took place in Chinese society during the 20th century and especially after the opening up in 1978. It highlights the search for a new equilibrium after the Cultural Revolution, when Chinese artists were confronted with Western art, coinciding with their rediscovery of China's cultural heritage, as well as the internationalization and commercialization of Chinese art and the move onto the global stage.

2.2 The birth of contemporary Chinese art

Developments in contemporary Chinese art have been extensively discussed and excellently documented by authors such as Lü Peng, Gao Minglu, Wu Hung, Li Xianting and many others.[1] However, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when contemporary Chinese art started to be produced. This is usually put at the end of the 1970s when China opened up. But evolutions in Chinese society in the 1980s in general and specifically in Chinese culture and art are often viewed as a continuation of movements dating from the beginning of the 20th century. The curators of the 1989 *China Avant-Garde* exhibition, for example, put the starting point of contemporary Chinese art already in the 1920s–30s, but due to historical reasons, contemporary art only started to flourish during the 1980s as demonstrated by that retrospective exhibition in 1989.[2]

In 1911, the end of the millennia-old Chinese empire with its centrally organized Confucianism-dominated system heralded the beginning of a new era for China. The

ancient aesthetic tradition of ink painting and calligraphy continued to exist, but underwent major changes and foreign ideas deeply influenced China, also in art. Confronted with the military might of the West, China was forced to reassess its tradition, culture and art. This led to fundamental changes and to what is sometimes referred to as the first enlightenment of China.

China's move to Communism in 1949 is one of the major reasons why the developments in art of the 1920s and 1930s were interrupted for several decades. Although social art already existed in the 1930s and 1940s in China, under communist rule, art was dominated by politics. Art served the production of educative tools rather than 'art for art's sake'. Nevertheless, as we will see, even in the most restrictive period of the Cultural Revolution, artists found ways to explore alternative artistic methods from the officially prescribed ones. But clearly it was the very vibrant climate of the 1980s that provided the right conditions for contemporary Chinese art to explode in all directions and this period signaled the start of the contemporary Chinese art scene as we know it today.

2.3 Main evolutions in contemporary Chinese art pre-1978

2.3.1 Chinese art at the beginning of the 20th century

Changes in Chinese art in the course of the 20th century can be viewed in close connection to transformations in the economy and politics. When the Chinese Empire ended in the early 1900s, Chinese society underwent comprehensive change. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 signaled a rejection of purely traditional Chinese art and an adaptation of Western-style realism as a model for Chinese art. Traditional Chinese ink painting continued to exist, but several Chinese artists started to adopt Western influences. Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu became leading figures in the reform movement and played an influential role in the establishment of a new art education system in China. Xu Beihong stressed the importance of Western drawing techniques as a basis for art study, including Chinese painting. The Communist Party followed his approach after 1949.

2.3.2 Socialist Realism – art as political tool: 1949–1978

A major transition in Chinese society and in art took place after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 when China became a centrally planned economy. This meant that art, like all other industries in China, became part of a centrally planned and controlled system. The role of the artist was to contribute to the development of a socialist society. Art was subject to political control in terms of form and content and had no commercial value.

Already in 1942 at the 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' Mao Zedong had proclaimed the standards for art and literature.[3] After the establishment of the People's Republic, these standards were implemented across China and remained dominant until the opening up in 1978. Art had to serve politics. The concept of Socialist Realism was borrowed from the Soviet Union. The art produced during this period had to be 'sublime, outstanding, perfect' and 'red, bright, and shining'.[4] This meant that all art and literature needed to depict socialist reality in a very positive way, pointing to a bright future. Everything was narrated in a black and white fashion and only socialist society was claimed to be perfect.

In the planned economy, every aspect of art – from creation to spectator – was closely connected to the government and under governmental supervision. All artists belonged to the Artists Society. Whenever the central art policy changed so did the guidelines. The focus of art was centrally decided and everyone had to follow. One example is that starting from 1964, the 'middle character' was no longer accepted. Positive characters needed to stand out above the masses, heroes above positive characters and superheroes above heroes. This resulted in propaganda where reality was too positive and grand heroes were exemplary in their behavior and had to be emulated.

All art schools and art institutes, museums, and even art material providers were under government control. Government authorization was required for exhibitions

and museums. Setting up an exhibition involved choosing exemplary works to reflect party policy or commissioning artists to create works for a special occasion. There was little or no room for experiment, personal perspective and creativity. Art criticism was part of the same controlled system and was more about 'comments', a mere evaluation in support of the socialist cause than anything else. Art that violated the official guidelines was criticized. Until 1978, Chinese art served the political agenda to educate the Chinese people in the spirit of socialism. Chinese art was created for 'internal consumption' and directed at the masses. During the Cultural Revolution, political dominance became extreme and art production was pushed into a deification of Mao Zedong and Maoist socialist society.

2.3.3 Underground art during the Cultural Revolution: No Name Group

In spite of the imposition of clear prescriptions on the kind of art that could be produced, a number of artists walked their own paths. Already in 1959, Zhao Wenliang painted his first landscape and even during the Cultural Revolution, Zhao Wenliang and his student Yang Yushu adhered to the idea of 'art for art's sake'. This was not so much an outwardly expressed public stance, but a quiet underground movement. Just before the Cultural Revolution and again after 1973, young artists like Zhang Wei, Li Shan, Wang Aihe, Ma Kelu, Shi Xixi, Wei Hai, Zheng Ziyan, Liu Shi, Tian Shuying and others joined the *No Name Group (wu ming)*. They spent weekends and holidays in the countryside painting from life, or they gathered in the homes of Zhao Wenliang or Shi Xixi to debate and study art and painting. Their primary focus was on landscape art but they also painted each other.

On January 1, 1975, the first underground exhibition was held in the home of Zhang Wei.[5] The political awareness of these artists becomes visible in their participation in the April 5th Movement on Tiananmen Square in 1976 after the death of Zhou Enlai.[6] The liberated climate after the opening up made it possible for them to surface. With the support of Liu Xun of the Beijing Artists' Association, the work of these artists was

exhibited in 1979, several months before the 'Stars' – about whom I will elaborate later and who are usually considered as the forerunners of contemporary Chinese art – came on the scene.[7]

2.4 Main evolutions in contemporary Chinese art post-1978

2.4.1 From Socialist Realism to a 'point of no return' in 1989

Times are changing

After the opening up, China gradually evolved from a strictly state-controlled planned economy to a more market-oriented economy, a 'socialist economy with Chinese characteristics'.[8] For art, this meant an evolution from total government control towards a more liberal climate. Artists Societies continued to exist and were subsidized by the government. Nevertheless, immediately after the opening up, alternative art deviating from the officially prescribed Socialist Realism entered the scene. Already in February 1979, the exhibition The *Twelve Artists of Shanghai* opened in Shanghai at the Children's Palace in Huangpu district. The participating artists showed works inspired by Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Expressionism. It was the first modern art exhibition and the first exhibition organized by individual artists since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The 1980s saw rapid developments in Chinese art and an explosion of new styles and forms, methods and content.[9] Contemporary Chinese art became a reflection of a fast-changing society.

Healing the Scars

The time was ripe for innovation. In 1978, after the Cultural Revolution ended, art institutes reopened their doors and newly graduated art students soon became teachers of the next generation. The Cultural Revolution was openly recognized as the '10 years of chaos'. This set the right tone for artists, filmmakers and writers to address the catastrophes of the last decade. The scars of the Cultural Revolution

became a popular subject of the so-called Scar Movement resulting in what was labeled as 'Scar art', 'Scar film' and 'Scar literature'.[10]

In 1979 Cheng Conglin painted a famous example in this tradition, *Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968* depicting the terrible battles between the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.[11]

New Stars shine bright

Not all artists turned their attention to the frustrations of the recent past. It was time for new things and cultural and political liberalization created the right climate. Immediately after the opening up, the Stars (*Xingxing*) drew attention to them.[12] The Stars was a loosely connected group of artists who no longer wanted to subject their art to China's official Socialist Realism art policy. They wanted to express personal feelings in their own individual way. Huang Rui wrote the preface of the first Stars exhibition as a manifesto: "We, twenty-three art explorers, place some fruit of our labor here. The world offers unlimited possibilities for explorers. We have used our own eyes to know the world, and our own brushes and awls to participate in it. Our paintings contain all sorts of expressions, and these expressions speak of our own individual ideals. The years come at us; there are no mysterious indications guiding our actions. This is precisely the challenge that life has raised for us. We cannot remove the element of temporality; the shadow of the past and the glow of the future are folded together, forming the various living conditions of today. Resolving to live on and remembering each lesson learned: this is our responsibility. We love the ground beneath our feet. The ground has nurtured us; we have no words to express our passion for the ground. Seizing the moment of the 30th anniversary of the nation's founding, we give our harvest back to the land, and to the people. This brings us closer. We are full of confidence."[13] The name they took refers to the title of an article by Mao Zedong written in 1930 'A Tiny Spark Can Set the Steppes Ablaze'.[14]

In 1979, this group of experimental artists wanted to take part in an official exhibition at the Beijing Museum of Fine Arts, but since many of them had never received a formal art education, they were not officially recognized and the museum rejected them. Consequently, the Stars organized an exhibition in the park outside the museum on September 27, 1979. It was the first time since the establishment of the People's Republic of China that the public was confronted with art and an exhibition other than an official one. The next day the police arrived and forced the Stars to remove their works. On September 29, the Stars exhibition was declared illegal.

In reaction to this, on September 30 the Stars posted their views on the 'Democracy Wall' in Xidan in West Beijing, a location where people shared ideas in the form of wall posters. They decided to hold a protest march against the censorship on October 1, China's National Day and the 30th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. They marched from the Democracy Wall to the Beijing Municipality Party Committee headquarters, demanding Artistic Freedom (*yao yishu ziyou*), while singing the National Anthem and other revolutionary songs.[15]

In November 1979, the first Stars exhibition was held in the Huanfan Studio in Beihai Park in Beijing. In 1980, the Stars were able to hold a second exhibition in Beihai Park with the support of Jiang Feng who was chairman of the Chinese Artists Association since 1979. He was one of the official figures who supported new developments on the art scene. Due to its success, the exhibition was extended and attracted interest in China and from abroad.

In 1980, the artists Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, Li Shuang, Wang Keping, Yan Li, Ai Weiwei, Yang Yiping, Mao Lizi, Qu Leilei, Zhong Acheng, Li Yongcun (Bo Yun), Shao Fei, decided to register officially as the 'Stars Painting Society' at the Beijing Artists Association. In doing so, they became official artists and part of the establishment.[16]

These evolutions very soon became part of the general, official artistic climate in China. Official institutions gradually absorbed artistic trends that had originated in the margins. The position of the Stars at the beginning of the 1980s is exemplary. As Julia Andrews rightly notes, the new artistic movement was only possible due to personnel changes in the authorized art circuit and a new official cultural policy in the mid-1980s.[17] Already in March 1980, the work of some of the Stars artists was being published in the official art magazine *Meishu*.[18]

From Socialist Realism to Rural Realism

Other artists, who had received training in the Socialist Realism tradition, turned away from the Maoist discourse. Many of them had spent time in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution where they had been confronted with the harshness of rural life. Instead of depicting the fake, embellished image of reality they had been taught, they created realistic works, leaning towards photorealism, showing the bitterness of real life. Rather than the big, bright and shiny stories of Socialist Realism their principles were to depict the 'small, suffering, and worn out', (*xiao*/small topics, 'small' people, particularly peasants; *ku*, 'suffering, depiction of the real suffering involved in a life of hardship and poverty'; *jiu* 'old', 'worn out', the face of a backward society).[19] Renowned artists who worked in this tradition are Luo Zhongli who painted *Father*[20] in 1979 and Chen Danqing with his Tibetan series.

Cultural Fever in the mid-1980s

By the middle of the 1980s, the Chinese had become accustomed to the idea that things were changing, and that China really had opened its doors. Having been cut off from the outside world for decades, after 1978 many Chinese people questioned the Chinese identity, contemplating their own culture and evaluating what came from outside. Some engaged in a wild fascination for everything Western, others turned to China's cultural tradition. Lively discussions between people defending different viewpoints and goals added up to what was called the 'Cultural Fever' (*wenhuare*).

Discussions about the direction China should take towards the future and questions about the Cultural Revolution reflected the uncertainty of the time, but also the dynamism of the social climate in the 1980s. This provided an impulse for enormous creativity. The cultural and artistic output of the 1980s reflects the complexity and rapid changes taking place in Chinese society. The systematic translation of Western texts resulted in Western theories flooding the Chinese theoretical stage, leading to intellectual debates held in symposia and magazines. Not only was the work of artists such as Duchamp, Yves Klein, and Fluxus[21] the subject of discussion, but also art theory, philosophy, literature, sociology, and psychology. Authors and thinkers such as Hegel, Kant, Eliot, Hesse, Camus, Kafka, Hemingway, Jack London, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Barthes, Jameson, Weber, Husserl, Sartre, Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida and many others were introduced in China.[22]

In 1980, The Commercial Press published the first series of *World Academic Masterpieces in Chinese Translation Series*, edited by Chen Yuan. Between 1983 and 1989, Jin Guantao and Bao Zunxin published a book series *Towards the World (Xiang shijie)* including 70 international titles like Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave* and John Naisbitt's *Megatrends*.[23] The term *Reading Fever (dushure)* is sometimes used to describe this period. It was a period of recovery and discovery following an era when politics had dominated every aspect of life, and where there had been little room for personal feelings or individualism.

But artists and intellectuals not only looked outside China. They also reassessed their own traditions. Even during the Cultural Revolution, Confucian influence was not extinct. Immediately after the opening up, there was room for a revival of Confucianism. Liang Shuming's *East-West Cultures and Their Philosophies* dating from 1921 was picked up again. Hodge and Louie[24] point out that the Cultural Revolution was "in many ways a concerted assault on the hold of Confucian tradition on Chinese minds, and the speed with which traditional ideas returned to

China after the collapse of the Cultural Revolution shows clearly the tenacity and strength of Confucianism".

River Elegy as the spirit of the time

One of the cultural products reflecting the atmosphere at the time was the television series *Heshang, River Elegy*[25] a series of six documentaries produced for CCTV by director Xia Jun in cooperation with Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang. The series severely criticized China for being backward and having been isolated for too long.[26] The glorification of grand icons of traditional Chinese culture was questioned and criticized, including the Great Wall, which was depicted as a symbol of tragedy, historic isolation and conservatism rooted in self-glorification, arrogance, and self-deception. The 'dragon' was considered the nightmare of Chinese ancestors. The Chinese invented 'fireworks', but while other nations used them to go into space, the Chinese still used them to drive out bad spirits. The 'Yellow River' was presented as the most important symbol of China. The Yellow River is the cradle of Chinese culture, but it was now stagnant, filled with the residue of the old civilization, and its banks were hollowed out. The unified social structure of the 'Confucian system' continued to cause problems for the Four Modernizations with its bureaucracy, privileges and corruption. The Yellow River needed revitalizing by the 'blue ocean' that symbolized the West. The thousands of years of Chinese culture were seen as no more than a burden. *Heshang* was aired on Chinese television in June and August 1988 and excerpts from an annotated text of the program were published in several leading national newspapers around the same time.

The series directed severe criticism at the communists and at the planned economy. "Why did capitalism not develop in China?" Even the economist Keynes would not be able to do anything in China because there were too many Chinese; overpopulation created human beings of inferior quality. China needed an industrial civilization with room for intellectuals and entrepreneurs. It needed to become part of the world market and to develop a healthy market with liberal prices. Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong had

not understood the laws of economy. Luckily, people in China like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang were prepared to change this. The Cultural Revolution reflected the cyclical shock of history. It was time for China to break out of the historical cycle. This could be done by embracing science and democracy and by embracing the 'blue ocean'. The establishment of Shenzhen as an economic development area in 1980 and the opening up of 14 coastal cities in 1986 were seen as a good start to connecting with the world. Such was the rhetoric of *Heshang*.

The makers of the series were convinced that the Chinese civilization had declined and ended. Chinese society with its Confucian and communist thinking was said to be suffocating, with all individuals supporting the leader at the top. What China needed was democracy, freedom and equality. The documentaries treated China harshly and were undoubtedly pro-Western. The broadcasts sparked heated debate within the Communist Party and in wider Chinese society.[27]

Heshang echoed the atmosphere of the time, which can also be found in other publications. In July 1985, the magazine *Jiangsu Huakan* no 7 published Li Xiaoshan's article *My views on Present Traditional Chinese Painting* in which he states that traditional Chinese painting had come to a dead-end and should only be preserved as an historically interesting genre.[28]

Tendencies during the Cultural Fever

Zhang Xudong describes the atmosphere: "Incredible scope and idiosyncrasy marked this Cultural Fever. Around 1987, for example, the streets of Beijing were flooded with beautifully printed albums of artistic photographs of the human body, which were sold side by side with translations of a dazzling variety of modern Western classics, as if reading Wittgenstein were just another form of sensuous stimulation, and Marcuse or Daniel Bell represented the same inspiration and restlessness symbolized by Madonna and Pepsi." [29]

Zhang Xudong analyzes three main schools in the Cultural Fever discussions. The Futurologists promoted Westernization in three steps: introduction of advanced technology, strengthening of democracy and law, and the rapid reform of the economic system.

The Culturalists wanted to resurrect the ancient Confucian tradition, not in a traditionalist version, but rather in relation to the intellectual movements of the 1920s and 1930s implying a compatibility of Confucian tradition and Chinese Marxist thought.

The Hermeneutic school, a younger generation of scholars born after 1949, took a more radical stand towards Chinese tradition and focused on the Geisteswissenschaft. They adopted Western theoretical discourse and were consequently criticized as 'wholesale Westernizers'.[30]

When explaining the creation of his now world famous work *Book from the Sky*, an installation for which he carved 4000 fake Chinese characters, (see illustrations pages 194, 195) the artist Xu Bing describes the climate of the time: "I began working on *Book from the Sky* at a time when I was constantly in a very anxious and confused mood. This mood was related to the 'cultural fever' present at the time in China. Culturally, Chinese people were sometimes overfed and at other times underfed. For example, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) the whole nation read only Chairman Mao's Red Book. After the Cultural Revolution ended, people were starved of culture and consumed everything available. During this time, I read so much and participated in so many cultural activities that my mind was in a state of chaos. My psyche became clogged with all sorts of random things. I felt uncomfortable, like a person suffering from starvation who had just gorged himself. It was at that point that I considered creating a book that would clean out these feelings." [31]

Artist Wang Jianwei describes the situation as follows: "the void left by age-long suppression was like a dry sponge, ready to soak up anything new (…) I crossed the centuries spanning Tolstoy and Duchamp, Botticelli and Borges in a single night." [32]

This was the vibrant climate in which artists worked after the opening up. The whole of China was changing at lightning speed. It was impossible for an artist not to be sensitive to this or not to take part. Chinese artists lived through this atmosphere and at the same time helped to create it. In this climate of early globalization when so many things were being imported, being Chinese implied an awareness of China's own cultural heritage, and a reassessment of what that exactly meant on a daily basis.

New topics in art: Theory, form and content

The artist Wu Guanzhong who had lived and studied in Paris and who had lectured in various institutes in Beijing was influential in raising a number of new questions about art in China. In 1979 and 1980, he published influential articles on 'formal beauty' and 'abstract beauty'.[33] One of the most heated discussions was about abstract art. Until the opening up, the concept of 'art for art's sake' had been taboo. In Chinese tradition throughout the ages, a certain link with reality had always been kept. Wu Guanzhong's view was that "abstract beauty is the core of formal beauty and people instinctively love formal and abstract beauty" and his discourse on the relationship between likeness and non-likeness, aroused heated debates in Chinese art circles. Other articles published by Wu Guanzhong provoked similarly heated debates.

Artists were not only experimenting with new styles and forms; the content of artworks also changed. A new subject was sensuality. Nudes and even scantily dressed women had formally been taboo. Proof of the controversy surrounding nudity in art was a mural created for Beijing Capital Airport depicting scantily dressed minority women. The authorities ordered that the mural be covered up after it was displayed. This illustrates the rigid atmosphere at the time and the tension between what artists created and what was officially allowed.

Artists also started to depict objects that were largely unknown to the Chinese public. Works like Geng Jianyi's *Salon de Beauté*, depicting women in beauty parlors or Zhang Peili's *There's no jazz tonight* showing a Western style musical instrument like the

saxophone, are two examples of new content.[34] Beauty salons did not exist in Maoist China, nor was there any access to Western music or instruments. These new topics in art mirrored the changes underway in Chinese society.

Artists such as Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Wu Shanzhuan and many others started to play with the form and content of the Chinese language, deconstructing Chinese characters or using messages disconnected from their original context. The close relationship between language and culture in China makes the investigation of language practices and of Chinese characters an integral part of the investigation of the local.

Magazines and newspapers

At the beginning of the 1980s, an artist's only contact with foreign art came through magazines or printed reproductions rather than the actual works. New developments in art found their way into Chinese magazines that had existed before 1978, such as *Meishu* and *Jiangsu Huakan*, and a number of new periodicals were established.

On June 15, 1979, the first issue of *World Art (Shijie meishu)* was published with a brief introduction on Western art movements. It introduced Western modern art schools after Neo-Impressionism. It was the first time a Chinese art magazine had discussed Western art with Chinese readers.[35]

In 1982, the art magazine *Meishu* published a series of *One Hundred Years of Modern Painting* by Joseph Emile Muller and Frank Elgar translated by Yao Guoqiang. For the first time, young Chinese artists were exposed to painters like Goya, El Greco, Van Gogh, Picasso, Francis Bacon, Salvador Dali, Kathe Kollwitz, and many others. After being closed off for decades, there was an outburst of creativity in all aspects of culture, literature, film, and art and along with it came a massive exploration of content, form, and materials. More than copying Western styles due to lack of inspiration, artistic experiments inspired by Western art served as a weapon to tear down preexisting artistic structures and the dominance of realist oil painting and traditional painting.[36]

Thanks to He Rong and Li Xianting, the two reform-minded editors of *Meishu*, the magazine introduced Western artistic genres to Chinese readers. Li Xianting published the only article ever to appear in the media about the second Stars exhibition in the 1980s in *Meishu* no 3.

Qu Leilei, one of the Stars, wrote the article *Art as self-expression*, which stated, "The essence of art is the self-expression of the painter's inner mind".[37]

In 1983, Li Xianting started a column in *Meishu* dedicated to abstract art.[38] During the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign of the same year, directed at the contamination of Chinese culture by Western influences, Li Xianting was fired for having published articles in favor of abstract art.[39] Gao Minglu and Wang Xiaojian turned *Meishu* into an important official forum for contemporary art in 1985–1986.[40]

The search for new opportunities to express artistic views also resulted in the establishment of a number of unofficial magazines in the mid- 1980s. Having been fired from *Meishu*, Li Xianting went on to become one of the editors of *Fine Arts in China/ Zhongguo meishu bao*, the first non-official art journal. Other influential magazines were *Art Trends/Meishu Sichao* in Wuhan 1985,[41] *Jiangsu Pictorial/Jiangsu Huakan*,[42] and *Artist/Huajia* in Hunan.

The newspaper *Beijing Qingnian Bao*, issues of which I researched for the period 1985 to 1993, was influential at the time contemporary Chinese art came into being. It reflects the vibrant art scene of the 1980s and reports on many events and performances. As such, it provides a good overview of general evolutions in Chinese society and more specifically, evolutions in contemporary Chinese art and the move from a strictly planned towards a more market-oriented economy. Since the newspaper excellently mirrors changes in society, I will briefly zoom in on some aspects of its evolution because it also helps to explain the climate of the 1980s.

The newspaper itself, with changes in layout and content, can be seen as an historical document and also as an art historical document, mirroring the *zeitgeist* in China after the opening up. During the 1980s – a period of creativity and experimentation – many modernist versions of Chinese characters are used in the titles and woodcut illustrations adorn the pages. However, it is still obvious that China is strongly communist and not the market-oriented economy it will become in the 1990s. Little attention is paid to market issues or advertising. But it is obvious that China has opened up. This is shown in the publication of a series of jokes in English, about fog in London, about Lincoln and Shakespeare. The content is a combination of, on the one hand, the study of Marxism and articles about young Western people with outrageous clothes and Punk hairstyles or skinheads in the West and on the other, articles about individualism. In 1988, there is an article about an exhibition of nude art, which was new at the time, and in 1989, an article about the rock star Cui Jian.

As of the 1990s, the design of the Chinese characters changes. The content of the newspaper is still a mixture of articles about evolutions in art and culture and the promotion of socialist ideas. In 1992, there is an article promoting socialism and China: *Our flag is like the sun*. A fundamental change in comparison to the 1980s is the appearance of commercial advertising.

The *Mao Fever (Maore)* of the 1990s is visible in the newspaper between 1991 and 1993. Articles about and pictures of Mao Zedong appear in every issue. At the same time, China already seems to be preparing to go into space.

From 1993, the newspaper has color pages and English language advertising plus double-page recruiting advertisements from companies like Motorola and Ericsson.

Beijing Qingjian Bao is obviously a channel for new developments in art and culture, with articles about Wang Shuo, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and many others. In the art section of each issue, new developments in art are slowly but surely discussed

especially at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In 1988, there is a prominent article about Wang Youshen and Liu Wei. In 1989, there is a two-page review of the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition and new developments in art. There is also an article by Shuang Mu in *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* about artists demonstrating in Beijing, with photos of them holding slogans like *We want democracy, Overthrow the officials* and the no U-turn logo of the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, which reflects the spirit of the 1980s before the June Fourth crackdown.[43] *Beijing Qingjian Bao* is a rich source of historical information well worth researching.

Lectures and congresses

For the first time since 1949, foreign scholars were once again invited to China to give academic lectures. In 1985, Roman Verostko, professor at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, gave a series of lectures covering 100 years of Western art at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art). He was also invited to several other cities across China. Also in 1985, Frederic Jameson introduced the idea of postmodernism in China during his lectures at Peking University and Shenzhen University, deeply influencing the way the Chinese interpreted the concept of postmodernism.

The Bulgarian artist and craftsman, Maryn Varbanov (1932–1989), who taught in Beijing from 1952 to 1959, returned to China to set up the Zhejiang Academy Varbanov Wall Hanging Art Research Department.

The introduction of foreign ideas and concepts led artists to question the role of art and the responsibility of the artist. Congresses were held with most leading artists and art critics to discuss the directions Chinese art should take. In 1985, the Oil Painting Art Seminar (*Youhua yishu taolunhui*) was held at Jinxian in Anhui province. Seventy artists, theorists, and critics participated, among them artists who had studied abroad. It was one of the most influential congresses of that time and became known as the 'Huangshan Meeting', named after the location close to Mount Huang.[44] In 1986, another important conference was held in Zhuhai. Artists, both avant-garde and

mainstream, came from all over the country to discuss their views on art. In 1988, a second Huangshan conference of major impact was held, with many artists presenting their work. This congress planted the seed for the preparation of the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing.

New Wave – experimentation as the norm

It was in this thriving climate that experiments in art and culture led to the development of different directions and new cultural forms. This was not limited to the visual arts. In theater, people such as Gao Xingjian were experimenting. Performance arts – with extreme performances using the human body – became a popular art form.[45] New directions were also being taken in literature.[46] Theorists and critics held debates and forums and published articles about these evolutions that broke from official dogma.[47]

The art scene in China interacted with and was closely connected to the literary scene. The artist Huang Rui was involved in publishing the first unofficial literary magazine *Today (Jintian)*. Artists and writers took the same standpoint: freedom of choice for artistic production and individual expression. This meant stepping away from government policy. Taking this position necessarily implied taking a political stand.

Artists distinguished themselves by their choice of style and subject matter and their individual expression. In rejecting Socialist Realism dogma, artists looked for inspiration in Western Modernism. They took inspiration from artists such as Andrew Wyeth in Realism, they also looked to Photorealism; to Surrealism with works by Alex Colville and Salvador Dali; to Abstraction; to Impressionism with Van Gogh and Cezanne; to Primitivism giving rise to a reexamination of Chinese folk arts; to Cubism with Pablo Picasso; to Pop Art with Robert Rauschenberg,[48] Jasper Johns, and Robert Motherwell; to Expressionism; and to Conceptual art with Marcel Duchamp.[49]

In China, inspiration from Western art like Symbolism and Surrealism were a means to counter the imposed Socialist Realism rather than an association with psychoanalysis.[50]

The variety of Western influences was merely a source of inspiration rather than a deep understanding of Western art history or a conscious decision to paint in one or another Western style. Most artists did not have deep knowledge of Western art developments in their Western context. More often than not, their understanding was superficial.

Artist Groups

The climate of the 1980s can be viewed as a dialogue between influences from abroad and the search for individual artistic identity. Many artists, such as Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, Zhang Peili, Huang Yongping, Mao Xuhui and others were deeply engaged in discussions about art. The rapid evolutions in art around the middle of the 1980s were coined by Gao Minglu as the New Wave Art Movement, also referred to as the '85 Art Movement.[51] Hundreds of artists across China formed small groups to discuss, collaborate and experiment with new art forms.[52]

The most prominent were the *Rationalist Group (Lixing huihua)* with the *North Art Group (Beifang qunti)*,[53] the *Pond Society (Chi she)*,[54] the *Current of Life (Shengming zhiliu)* and the *Anti-art Movement (Fan yishu huodong)*.

In spite of the experimental tendencies of the '85 movement, 98% of these artists had graduated from official art schools.[55]

The *North Art Group*[56] with among others, artists Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, Ren Jian, and Liu Yan, believed that the 'civilization of the North' they promoted would surpass both Western and traditional Chinese civilization. The production of surrealist paintings with landscape elements and abstract forms suggested the glacial terrain of northern China. They had metaphysical tendencies and there was a major focus on idealistic notions of history, culture, religion and philosophical concepts such as value theory and ontology.[57] The early works of Wang Guangyi are exemplary, including the *Part 1 of Concretionary Northern Polar Region* paintings (1985), *Post-Classical: Simultaneous*

Notification of Conception (1986), and *Post-Classical: Death of Marat* (1986) (see illustration page p 219).[58]

In contrast, the *Pond Society* artists in Hangzhou with Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi and Wang Qiang, displayed a sense of humor and absurdist spirit. The work of Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi is in the scope of the present analysis. Their views on theory and practice will become clear later in this book. Examples of works by this group are *Work #1: Yang's Taiji Series* (installation 1986), and the performance *King and Queen* by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi (1986).[59]

The *Current of Life* artists or Southwest Artist Group promoted anti-urban pastoralism or regionalism and had a tendency to emphasize spirituality and intuition advocating responsiveness and enlightenment. Mao Xuhui, Pan Dehai, Zhang Xiaogang, and Ye Yongqing among others produced work in this style. Zhang Xiaogang's *Newborn Phantom* (1984) and Pan Dehai's *Broken corncobs: Houshan* (1989) are examples.[60] All these artists have now become world famous and have evolved away from their original views, each developing their own specific styles. None of the *Current of Life* artists fall within the scope of this study.

The *Anti-art Movement* inspired by Huang Yongping and Xiamen Dada combined Dadaism with Chan Buddhism and Taoism in their conceptual art.[61] Their 'anti-art' and 'pan-art' movement focused on the difficulties of language, culture, and modern civilization. Representative works are Huang Yongping's *The History of Chinese Painting and Modern Painting History* (1987) and *Heading towards the turntable* (1988).[62]

Next to these well-known groups, numerous other groups were formed. In October 1985, the *Jiangsu Youth Art Week – Modern Art Exhibition* opened at the Jiangsu Art Museum. It was the first art activity organized independently by a non-governmental group founded by young Jiangsu artists. Three hundred artworks – paintings, arts and crafts, fashion, sculpture and photography – were exhibited. In 1986, the group's leading members

became adherents of Surrealism calling themselves the *Color Red: Travel (Hongse: Lü)* with Ding Fang, Xu Lei and others.[63] The *Color Red: Travel*, sometimes translated as the *Red Brigade*, stands for 'the journey of life, that is, our appreciation of the course of history, culture, and life'.[64] An example of work by this group is Ding Fang's *The Strength of Tragedy #2* and *The Strength of Tragedy #3*.[65]

Solitary artists

Not all artists joined groups. Some artists preferred to work on their own in the solitude of their studios (*fei qunti*). Li Shan and Ding Yi, both working in Shanghai, are examples of artists who actively exhibited without ever participating in any particular group. When interviewed, Xu Bing, who works in Beijing, often repeats that he wanted to take a distance from all the tumult and discussions. Of course, artists who belonged to groups also worked independently.

Continuation and innovation of the ink painting tradition

Amidst the bustle of new artistic developments and international influences, traditional literati painting continued to exist. China has an amazing aesthetic tradition stretching back thousands of years that still continues today. The techniques and principles of ink painting and calligraphy and traditional philosophy continued to influence the contemporary artistic oeuvre of artists such as Li Shan, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Yu Youhan, and many others.[66]

Fei Dawei points to the fact that experiments in ink tradition are nothing new and were an integral part of traditional Chinese painting in ancient times. During the Tang-dynasty a "new school of experimental painters began to paint with their tongues, hair, fingers, toes, and their entire bodies. They also experimented using fire and water to paint."[67] Examples of experimental artists can be found throughout the history of Chinese traditional painting. Twentieth century innovations in ink painting and calligraphy can therefore be considered as a continuation of innovation in that field, rather than something totally new. The question remains as to whether innovation in

the ink painting tradition should be called contemporary art as distinct from traditional art, or whether it should be seen as a continuation of the latter.

1989 China/Avant-Garde exhibition

In 1987, a number of art critics started to envision a New Wave Art exhibition. Their ideas crystallized into the *China/Avant-Garde (Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan)* exhibition held in 1989.

In February 1989 the first exhibition organized by independent curators (*duli zezhanren*) in China was held at the China Art Gallery in Beijing with permission of the authorities. Gao Minglu was head of the organizing committee. Before the exhibition opened it was officially agreed that performance art and erotic art were forbidden. However, in the end, the supervising curator Li Xianting gave permission to artists to engage in performance and erotic art.[68]

The no 'U-turn' traffic sign was used as the exhibition's logo. This logo had a double meaning: firstly as a symbol of renewal (most Chinese were not familiar with this Western traffic sign and did not know its original meaning). Secondly, it meant that there was no possibility of returning to earlier times.[69]

This exhibition was a major step towards an independent art scene in China away from the control of official institutions. It included 186 artists and 293 artworks. More than 20,000 artists came to Beijing to see the exhibition.[70] It can be viewed as a retrospective of the developments in the decade following the opening up of China.

Performances were given at the exhibition opening. Wang Deren handed out condoms in the gallery, Wu Shanzhuan sold fresh seafood in *Big Business* and Li Shan performed *Washing Feet*. Song Haidong's installation *The Earth in the Eyes of Extraterrestrial* was also part of the show.

The exhibition was intended to be open for two weeks, but the police closed it down twice. The installation *Dialogue* by Tang Song and Xiao Lu, in which Xiao Lu fired a gun during the opening ceremony, led to the arrest of both artists and the first closing of the exhibition. The artists had tested the limits of official boundaries, but they counted on the fact that their family connections would have some influence, and indeed, they were freed after just a few days. The exhibition was closed for a second time following a bomb threat.

In 2007, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing held a retrospective of the 1985 period curated by Fei Dawei. Many of the artworks from *China/Avant-Garde* were in the exhibition, among them the installation by Tang Song and Xiao Lu.[71]

The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989 attracted international attention and was a crucial step for most of the artists who participated in the Venice Biennale, on whom we focus in this book.[72] It also paved the way for the exhibition in Hong Kong in 1993, curated by Li Xianting and Johnson Chang Tsong-zung, which in turn brought contemporary Chinese art onto the international scene. This exhibition was later referred to as 'the big exhibition' (*dazhan*).

The 1989 June Fourth incident occurred in Beijing just a few months after the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. This brought a premature halt to the vibrant cultural climate of the 1980s. In 1990, the '85 Movement was strongly criticized by officials. For a few years, artists withdrew from the public arena.

2.4.2 Post-1989 evolutions

Recovering from the shock

After the Tiananmen Incident, new developments in art and the internationalization of Chinese art temporarily stagnated. Curators were forbidden to work, art magazines were forbidden to publish. Attempted exhibitions were quickly closed down. Artists looked for alternative ways to share their artwork with the public. Private exhibitions

in the homes of artists were held, or other locations were sought. A number of artists published books to share their work. Examples are the *Black Cover Book (Hei pi shu)*[73] by Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing and Zeng Xiaojun, also covering work by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, and the *White Cover Book (Bai pi shu)* with work by among others Ding Yi and Zhang Peili.[74]

Performance art became quite popular, but there were often few spectators. Zhang Huan was one of the artists who engaged in extreme body art performances, using his body as a piece of art and submitting it to the most severe conditions that tested the limits of what is bearable for a human being. His work exemplifies the extreme proportions art took in China. Photographers such as Rong Rong played an important role recording these events and spreading ideas and information about them.

New Realism and Neo-Academic art

At the end of the 1980s, artists began to paint life as it was. All superfluous elements were left out and painters registered reality as they saw it. In the first half of the 1990s, a number of teachers from the Central Academy of Fine Arts held an exhibition of their work in which they used a figurative style. Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong are exemplary of this direction in Chinese art. We will focus on the work of Yu Hong later in this book. An example by Liu Xiaodong is *Pastoral* (1989).[75] In contrast to Fang Lijun and Liu Wei discussed below, their work was not cynical but rather a simple registration of everyday life.

Cynical Realism and Political Pop

After the events of June Fourth 1989, a general malaise occupied many minds in China. This malaise influenced two major developments in art: Political Pop (*Zhengzhi popu*) and Cynical Realism (*Wan shi xianshi zhuyi*).

Already in the mid-1980s, there had been an emergence of artists experimenting with Pop Art in the wake of the Robert Rauschenberg exhibition in Beijing. Like other artistic

experiments of that time, Pop Art was mainly used as a tool to attack conventional Chinese views on aesthetics and a means to step away from politically imposed standards.

From 1987 onwards, artists started to use references to Mao Zedong.[76] Mao Zedong became a 'consumer item'.[77] Political Pop triggered a deconstruction of Party symbols.[78] Various artists used a mixture of political icons and icons associated with consumerism, blending propaganda symbols of the Cultural Revolution with signs of contemporary consumer culture as well as traditional culture. Mao Zedong became an icon to be used in combination with elements from folklore art or icons of capitalism.

As of 1987/1988, the artists Zhang Hongtu,[79] Wang Ziwei, Yu Youhan, and Wang Guangyi referred to Mao Zedong in their work. This was an expression of a Mao complex.[80] Artists who grew up under Mao Zedong were deeply formed and influenced by him. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Mao and the icons of the Cultural Revolution were reassessed in art. With its use of Chinese political icons, Political Pop can be seen as an evolution in art that was inspired by Pop Art in America, but strongly influenced by the Chinese-specific momentum after the opening up.

A number of the artists featured in this book such as Feng Mengbo, Geng Jianyi, Li Shan, Liu Wei, Wang Guangyi, Wang Ziwei and Yu Youhan, have used this kind of iconic language at some point. Some explicitly used the image of Mao Zedong, while others made reference to the icons of Cultural Revolution propaganda.

References to Mao Zedong not only implied an anti-official stand. They were part of the complexity of rapid change in Chinese society. Art critic Li Xianting called it a "Mao obsession" arising from the fact that the recent past "still haunted the popular psyche", combining "both a nostalgia for the simpler, less corrupt, and more self-assured period of Mao's rule with a desire to appropriate Mao Zedong, the paramount god of the past, in ventures satirizing life and politics in contemporary China".[81] For Geremie Barmé,

the use of these images after 1989 was more of an indulgence in consumer irony than in social critique. Commoditized images of Mao were used "to grease the wheels of commerce", a disturbing "cultural significance of market-oriented dissent".[82]

Political Pop artists used the Maoist discourse as a source for "the construction of a new identity in the face of growing globalization and international influences."[83] In spite of their satirizing and criticism of Mao Zedong and the political indoctrination of his time, artists continued to worship and desire the Maoist discourse. According to curator Johnson Chang, the Political Pop wave at the beginning of the 1990s was partly provoked by the events of 1989 in defiance of the current leadership. But it was also part of the nostalgia for Mao Zedong in a period of rapid social change. Mao Zedong's image was visible everywhere in society, on taxicabs carrying talismans of Mao and Zhou Enlai, on cigarette lighters playing the national anthem, on clocks and watches with Mao's waving hand.

A younger generation of artists, such as Fang Lijun and Liu Wei expressed a kind of absurd and cynical view on life in their work, ridiculing society, politics and the world around them, a '*liumang*-esque'[84] style.[85] The sense of malaise and helplessness in Chinese society at the time was depicted in a sarcastic way. Artwork from this movement was dubbed Cynical Realism.[86]

The opening up of China in 1978 led to the discovery of artistic styles and methods from abroad, which initially resulted in experimentation with different styles borrowed from the traditional Western canon and the discovery of what had happened in art in the West during the 20th century. At the same time, it led to the rediscovery of China's artistic and cultural tradition. The confrontation with the international scene and the reassessment of China's tradition was reflected in a search for a new equilibrium in the ideological vacuum immediately after the Cultural Revolution. In contrast to the suffocating atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, the vibrant climate of the 1980s provided the freedom to search for individual artistic language and identity. Whereas

before 1978 being an artist had meant representing the ideological viewpoint of the government and trying to comply with what the Party wanted to represent, now artists could approach art from their own perspective and make personal choices.

Along with China's economy, Chinese art moved from being strictly planned towards market-oriented, slowly but surely connecting with the international art scene from the 1990s onwards.

2.5 The Passage to the East artists

The artists who participated in the 1993 Venice Biennale and their selected works had a major influence on the global perception of contemporary Chinese art, a perception that persists today. In this study, we take these artists, their viewpoints and artworks as a test case to contextualize and explore issues relating to the position of contemporary Chinese art in the world today.

Most of these artists have their artistic roots in the 1980s, a time when Chinese art was fully controlled by the Chinese government. Most of them have lived through the changes China has undergone in recent decades and can therefore be considered exemplary of overall developments in the Chinese contemporary art scene during the 1980s and the transition period from fully state-controlled, censored art to what we know today. The older generation, such as Li Shan, Yu Youhan, but also Ding Yi, Song Haidong, Sun Liang, Wang Guangyi, Wang Ziwei, Xu Bing, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi strongly influenced the coming into being and development of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s. Slightly younger artists like Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Feng Mengbo and Yu Hong, began their careers under different conditions and an already more open climate.

I will briefly introduce them in alphabetical order, along with some of their statements about being an artist and art in general. A selection of their artworks and their respective contributions and viewpoints will be discussed in detail throughout the rest of the book. The impact of these artists on the development of contemporary Chinese art and their

position in the Chinese art world, their relation to politics and their viewpoints vis-à-vis an officially controlled art scene, their artistic language, media and personal choices will become clear in the course of the next chapters, where I allow them speak.

Ding Yi was born as Ding Rong in Shanghai in 1962. In 1983, he graduated from the Shanghai College of Arts and Crafts. In 1986, his work was exhibited for the first time. He lives and works in Shanghai.

Ding Yi is best known as an abstract painter. At the beginning of his career, he engaged in performances during which he and other artists wrapped themselves in cloth.[87]

In 1988 Ding Yi made a series of paintings using only 'x' and '+'. Each of these paintings was entitled *Appearance of Crosses (shishi)*, and individually identified by a date and serial number. These largely abstract paintings condense x and + symbols into compact formations and patterns. Since then, these symbols have been a key motif in his work and are his particular artistic trademark.

In early *Appearance of Crosses* works, Ding Yi used drawing materials to rigorously form lines. From 1991 onwards, he moved away from extremely structured compositions and began to experiment with materials, colors and techniques. He continued to use the grid framework of his earlier work as the basis of his composition, but he began to work freehand, loosening his technique. Adopting less formal materials than oil paint, he experimented with a range of media such as charcoal, chalk, ballpoint, pen and ink, and pencil on a variety of supports, ranging from canvas, silk and paper to card, folding screens, fans and tartan cloth. Ding Yi has been involved in architectural projects and he has also created installations. No matter what media he uses, the crosses reveal the artist behind the artwork.

The process of reduction was so fundamental to Ding Yi that he even changed his real name Ding Rong丁荣 to Ding Yi丁乙.

Ding Yi describes his paintings in a mathematical way: “My painting is as clear and well integrated as 1+1=2” [88]

“When I began to paint *Appearance of Crosses*, I chuckled to myself, because no one understood my paintings. They thought this was mere fabric design. But this was exactly what I wanted.” [89] (See illustrations pages 148, 149, 153).

Fang Lijun was born in Handan, Hebei province in 1963. He graduated in 1989 from the Print Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. He lives and works in Beijing.

His oeuvre comprises pencil drawings, oil paintings, ink-and-wash paintings, sculpture and woodcuts. Fang Lijun’s talent was recognized early on and he exhibited in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition while still a student. Fang Lijun’s work was published on the cover of the New York Times magazine in 1993, at a time when knowledge about contemporary Chinese art in the West was almost non-existent.

At the beginning of his career Fang Lijun created pencil drawings, but he is best known for his colorful and bluish oil paintings.

He has recently turned to more traditional methods using woodcut and black and white prints. Fang Lijun has also made a variety of sculptures in which he uses the same recognizable baldheads as in his paintings and woodcuts.

Fang Lijun states: “I have never cared whether I am avant-garde or not. So much of my work takes at least two years from conception to completion, so I cannot possibly worry about being fashionable when it finally appears.” [90]

Both Fang Lijun and Liu Wei as representatives of Cynical Realism, a term coined by art critic Li Xianting at the beginning of the 1990s. His article *Cynical Realism and Political Pop. Boredom and De-construction in Post-89 Chinese Art (89 hou yishu zhong de wuliaogan he jiegou yishi wanshi xieshi zhuyi yu zhengzhi popu chaoliuxi)* was one of the

most influential articles on the developments in Chinese art at the time. Both artists have a roguish sense of humor, and a cynical atmosphere often pervades their work, especially at the beginning of their careers.[91] (See illustrations pages 130, 155, 190).

Feng Mengbo was born in Beijing in 1966. In 1987 he graduated from the Design Department of Beijing School of Arts & Crafts and in 1991 from the Printmaking Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. He lives and works in Beijing.

Feng Mengbo’s graduation work was a set of papier-mâché molds depicting skeletons, household objects, and personal artifacts. At the beginning of his artistic career, he painted computer game images. Later he created multimedia installations that the public could manipulate or interact with. In his ‘games’ Feng Mengbo uses many popular idols including Mao Zedong, Peking Opera actor Yang Zirong, Bruce Lee and also his own image.

In recent years he has developed a computerized technique for landscape painting. To be able to develop this he studied traditional Chinese landscape painting in-depth. His computerized landscapes can in many ways be seen as a continuation of traditional Chinese landscape painting (see illustrations pages 133, 153, 200).

Feng Mengbo questions art in general: “Today, I find it very difficult to explain what art actually is. Is it what we see at museums or is it what we see at the Internet cafe?” [92]

Geng Jianyi was born in 1962 in Zhengzhou, Henan Province. In 1985 he graduated from the Oil Painting Department at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou. He lives and works in Hangzhou.

Early in his career, Geng Jianyi was influential as an oil painter who continuously sought new styles. He was one of the artists featured in the *Xin Kongjian* exhibition and a member of the *Pond Society*. Together with Zhang Peili, he engaged in performances

at the beginning of his career. He is best known for his interventions and installations, working with or involving groups of people, in which he questions the position of the individual in society and bureaucracy such as the marriage law, but also art and the role of the artist.

When asked what his most important work is, Geng Jianyi answers: “None of them. I just do what I feel I have to do. The process of creating art is most important to me. I don’t have much to say about my work.” [93] (See illustrations pages 53, 124, 125, 155, 168, 198).

Li Shan was born in Lanxi, Heilongjiang Province in 1942. After graduating from middle school in 1963, he spent one year at Heilongjiang University in Harbin studying Russian. In 1964 he applied to the Shanghai Drama Academy, the only school with an art program that was admitting new students during the Cultural Revolution. He graduated in oil painting from the Stage Design Department in 1968. He moved to New York at the end of the 1980s. He lives and works in New York and Shanghai.

During the 1980s, Li Shan created abstract paintings. He became known as one of the important figures of the Political Pop movement by using the image of Mao Zedong and icons of the Cultural Revolution in combination with erotic imagery. He is best known as a painter, but uses other media as well. His performance *Washing feet* featured in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing. For Li Shan: “Art is life itself.” [94]

In recent years he has begun experimenting with images that combine pictures of his own body parts with other media in reference to genetic manipulation: “New creatures can replace existing and old animals, plants, germs and human beings (...) I hope people can move away from our existing biological position and accept some thoughts of life equality and Great Harmony between creatures.” [95] (See illustration page 138).

Liu Wei was born in 1965 in Beijing. In 1989 he graduated from the woodcut department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Liu Wei made his name at the beginning

of the 1990s with oil paintings depicting distorted images of his father, a People’s Liberation Army officer, and political leaders such as Mao Zedong and Zhu De. At the beginning of his career Liu Wei was associated with Fang Lijun due to the roguish atmosphere of their work. But he was also associated with Yu Youhan, Wang Guangyi and Wang Ziwei for his use of Mao Zedong imagery in some paintings.

Later, Liu Wei started to produce erotic pink images in dripping paint. Still later in his career, he created more ‘quiet’ work with landscapes, often combining text and images. Liu Wei’s unique brushwork reveals his passion. He agrees: “I go on painting, painting, painting, until I reach a point at which I think ‘Oh, it’s very suitable, there is no need to alter or touch up the work anymore’ (...) only then can the painting be said to be finished.” [96] Regarding his view on the world: “People, animals, landscapes are all the same; they all have a soul; that’s why I melt them together in my paintings.” [97] (See illustrations pages 11, 132, 204).

Song Haidong was born in Yangzhou in 1958. He graduated from the department of sculpture at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou in 1985. He lives and works in Shanghai.

Song Haidong says: “From childhood I knew I wanted to paint.” [98]

He is known for his three-dimensional works and for his action art and performances early in his career. From the middle of the 1990s, he turned away from contemporary Chinese art toward Buddhism and Buddhist art.

He comments on his early career: “Between 1982 and 1983 I was a teacher in Shanghai, but in the end they gave me a job at the Natural History museum where there was no work for a sculptor. Then they had an exhibition where they needed a primitive man, so that is where I fitted in for them. Later I heard it was because they thought I was a bit too extravagant in the way I looked with long hair and casual dress.” [99] (See illustration page 189).

Sun Liang was born in Hangzhou in 1957. He graduated in 1982 from the Fine Art Design Department at the Shanghai Light Industry College. He lives and works in Shanghai.

Sun Liang played an active role in new developments in art in the mid-1980s when he engaged in performances. However, he is best known for his oil paintings depicting a surreal, colorful and dreamlike world with bizarre figures and grotesque shapes in which all connection with reality seems to be lost.

Later in his career, Sun Liang started to use long, thin canvases, a format inspired by traditional landscape scrolls. Besides oil painting, Sun Liang has created delicate glass sculptures in the same shape as the figures in his oil paintings. Instead of looking to the outside world, Sun Liang closes off and creates his own world. He describes how he retreats from the real world into the world of his art: “The exit leading to the outside world is gradually closing, and I am entering a more personal, more casual mood. After closing the doors and windows of my studio, my world becomes huge.” [100] (See illustrations pages 25, 114, 201).

Wang Guangyi was born in Harbin, Heilongjiang in 1957. He graduated from the Oil Painting Department at the Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy (China Academy of Art) in 1984. He lives and works in Beijing.

Wang Guangyi became widely known with his *Great Criticism Series* in which he combines famous brands and other icons with the artistic language of Cultural Revolution propaganda. His work includes oil painting, video, sculptures and installations. During the 1980s New Wave, he was actively involved in theoretical discussions and he established the *Northern Art Group*. His work reflects deep knowledge of both Western and Chinese art. Much of his work makes clear reference to the Maoist period and to the heroism of Socialist Realist tradition. The 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition showed his Mao paintings with grids. His work from the beginning of the 1990s is labeled as

Political Pop, but he works in a rich variety of styles and with diverse materials. Later in his career, Wang Guangyi became concerned with global issues such as migration and war.

About being an artist he says: “I never thought about doing anything else. I loved painting when I was a boy (…) You also can’t say right or wrong about an artwork. So, art, to be precise, contemporary art, fits me. Traditional art is not right for me because it has very strict rules. I can’t do things that can be proven right or wrong. Film is not suitable for me. It requires cooperation. I’m not good at teamwork. I just want to do what I want to do; it’s not right or wrong.” [101] (See illustrations pages 159, 219, 220).

Wang Ziwei was born in Shanghai in 1963. He graduated from the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts in 1983. He currently lives in London and in Shanghai. Wang Ziwei is most famous for his Political Pop paintings, which are strongly indebted to Roy Lichtenstein. Early in his career he also created other work.

He is known for being highly individual and playful. He was one of the first Chinese artists to use the image of Mao Zedong in his work.

Wang Ziwei’s view on being an artist is as follows: “Painters are folk full of prejudices; painting their hobby horse and they gallop off, banging into each other like dodgem-cars at a fun fair. It is hilariously touching. I laughed myself to tears, and then I got bored, and perhaps began to grasp things more clearly. So I began to paint, saying to myself here’s your chance – and chance it was. Painting served as my launchpad, my passport, a substitute for non-existent diplomas; it taught me and helped me understand lots of things. The years were slipping by and there was I hobbling along, trailing my desire to be a painter the way some people wear ceremonial swords they haven’t the faintest idea how to wield.” [102] (See illustrations pages 223, 245).

Xu Bing was born in Chongqing in 1955 and grew up in Beijing on the campus of Peking University. He graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1981.

Between 1988 and 1989, he lectured at the Academy. He settled in the US in 1990. He currently lives and works in New York and Beijing. He is now Vice-President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

Xu Bing has created woodblock prints and ink paintings. He is famous for his installations, interventions and performances. He was widely acclaimed for his installation *Book from the Sky*. He has used animals in a number of his artworks: pigs, sheep, zebra, parrots and silkworms. Xu Bing elaborates on this: "I like working with animals. You don't know what will happen with them. On the other hand, in comparison with people, they don't think too much." [103]

Xu Bing explains his work: "Different artworks have different ways of being important to me as an artist. In some of my works the process of making them is most important. During the whole process, like in the making of *Book from the Sky*, I feel a kind of excitement with what I am doing. Other works find their importance in the impact they have on society. To me *Book from the Sky, English Square Calligraphy* and *Book from the Earth* belong to the same concept: communication. But while *Book from the Sky* is very much the blocking of communication, *Book from the Earth* must enable communication between all people." [104] (See illustrations pages 145, 183, 194, 195, 197, 202).

Yu Hong was born in Xian in 1966. She graduated from the Fine Art Oil Painting Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1988 and completed her M.A. in 1995. She works as a lecturer at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. She lives and works in Beijing.

Yu Hong was born into a painter's family: "My mother Gao Zhenmei was a student in the class of '64 in the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Under her influence I started painting at Beijing's Youth Palace. I entered the Fine Arts High School in 1980 and was exposed to various kinds of art styles. I then entered the Oil Painting Department of the Central Academy in 1984. When the '85 New Wave swept across the country

I was rather quiet and withdrawn. Students in the academy were relatively conservative during that period." [105]

In the post-New Wave period, her work is labeled as New Realism.

Yu Hong is mainly an oil painter. Her canvases can be very large. Her compositions are made with bold brushstrokes against a background that is often monochrome or 'empty'. Her most recent paintings on silk lean more towards Chinese traditional methods. Since the beginning of her art career, her work depicts daily life and the familiar environment of family and friends. Yu Hong explains: "I live in a crowd in which I discover plenty of touching things that are far beyond expression with words. These are human beings' sensitivity, weakness, dignity, misunderstanding, helplessness, sincerity and love stories; things that move people; those are the themes of my works." [106]

Yu Hong's name is associated with the work of her husband Liu Xiaodong who also paints in the New Realism style. Filmmaker Wang Xiaoshuai made the film *The Days* in 1993, in which Yu Hong and Liu Xiaodong are the protagonists. In 2008–2009, Wang Xiaoshuai made a documentary about Yu Hong: *The Days about Yu Hong* (see illustrations pages 111, 208, 213, 226).

Yu Youhan was born in Shanghai in 1943. In 1973 he graduated from the Art and Design department at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. He lives and works in Shanghai.

Yu Youhan is most famous for his Mao paintings. His oeuvre, however, encompasses a rich variety of styles, methods and media, ranging from abstract art inspired by traditional Chinese aesthetics and philosophy, over oil painting using the icons of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, to landscape painting. In his early work, he experimented with many styles inspired by Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Primitivism and so on. His colorful Mao paintings are reminiscent of Pop Art and of Chinese folk art. Later in his career, he moved to landscape painting.

Yu Youhan's view on being an artist is as follows: "For artists, being ahead of time is easy. Waking up from a dream, a new idea pops up." [107] (See illustrations pages 95, 147, 158).

Zhang Peili was born in Hangzhou in 1957. In 1984, he graduated from the Oil Painting Department at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art).[108] He lives and works in Hangzhou.

Zhang Peili's work includes painting, photography, installations, video and performance. He was one of the initiators and most important painters of the *Xin Kongjian* exhibition and of the *Pond Society*. He set up the multimedia department at the Hangzhou Academy. He holds strong ideas and throughout his career he has had a deep impact on the development of contemporary Chinese art.

For Zhang Peili, art is communication: "From my point of view, artworks shouldn't be like a diary. When artists create works of art – facing different material, media, or objects – they attempt to find meaning among very mixed phenomena. It appears that art has the capacity to communicate something." [109] (See illustrations pages 127, 150, 164, 165).

2.6 Conclusion

After exploring the complexity of the East-West relations and interactions in the first chapter, this chapter focused on art in China, giving a general overview of what happened during the course of the 20th century, and especially in recent decades. It also introduced the artists who participated in the 1993 Venice Biennale, commented on their selection and the criticism this received in China.

The following three chapters will explore the experiences and viewpoints of these artists and what they express via their artwork in the post-socialist, post-traditional and post-colonial contexts.

1 Li Xianting's influential article "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art" is published in translation in various books and magazines, such as Barmé, 1993, pp. 5–11, translated by Valerie C. Doran; other references: Lü Peng 1992, 2006, 2010; Yi Dan, 1992; Gao Minglu 2006, Wu Hung 2005, 2010.

2 Yin Jinan, 2002, p 267.

3 Denton Kirk, 1996, pp. 458–484.

4 Barmé, Chang, 1993, p 5.

5 Gao Minglu, 2007, p 123.

6 Gao Minglu, 2007, p 114.

7 The situation of the No Name Group, where artists had been working underground during the Cultural Revolution and were able to surface in the public domain after the opening up, can be compared to the situation for poetry. The *Misty Poets (Menglongshi)* had been working underground during the Cultural Revolution and became part of the official establishment immediately after opening up and were able to publish their poems in official magazines.

8 The term 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' was officially used for the first time at the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party in September 1982.

9 For an extensive overview of art developments in China see: Lü Peng, Yi Dan, 1992.

10 The Scar Movement was named after a story by Lu Xinhua 'The Scar' (*Shanghen*) published in 1978.

11 Lü Peng, 2010, p 743.

12 Pictures of the Stars can be found in Lebold Cohen Joan, 1987, pp. 59–63, Wu Hung, 2010, p 6.

13 Huang Rui, 2007, p 288.

14 Koppel-Yang, 2003, p 127.

15 The Democracy Wall was short-lived. On 6 December 1979, Beijing prohibited the posting of Big Character posters on the Xidan Democracy Wall.

16 In 1979 and 1980, exhibiting was problematic for the Stars. However, in 2006, a retrospective exhibition was held at the Hong Kong Museum of Art Gallery *The Comeback of the Stars*. See: *Paroles*, Mai/Juin 2006, pp. 32–35.

17 Andrews, Gao, 1993 p 8.

18 Wu Hung, 2005, p 18.

19 Li Xianting in Barmé, Chang, 2001, p xv.

20 Lü Peng, 2010, p 748.

21 Driessen, Mierlo, van, 1997, p 14.

22 Zhang Zhaohui, 2005, p 8.

23 Fei Dawei, 2008.

24 Hodge, Louie, 1998, p 120.

25 Parts of the series can be viewed on:
http://www.archive.org/details/ddtv_40_china_presenting_river_elegy

26 Advisors were Jin Guantao and Wan Yining.

27 The discourse of *Heshang* contrast sharply with present day Chinese discourse as circulated by Confucian institutes across the world. Today, the government promotes a reconnection of modern with ancient China and the glorification of ancient Chinese culture.

28 Li Xiaoshan, Jiangsu Huakan, 1985, p 7.

29 Zhang Xudong, 1997, p 268.

30 More information about the main trends in the Cultural Fever in Zhang Xudong, 1997, pp. 35–70.

31 Silbergeld, Ching, 2006, p 99.

32 Driessen, Mierlo, van, 1997, p 99.

33 *Meishu*, 1979.5, pp. 33–44 and *Meishu* 1980.10, pp. 37–39.

34 Lü Peng, p 862.

35 Fei Dawei, UCCA, November 5, 2007 – February 17, 2008.

36 Gao Minglu, "What is the Chinese Avant-Garde" in Andrews, Gao, 1993, p 4.

37 Fei Dawei, UCCA, November 5, 2007 – February 17, 2008.

38 Influential articles are He Xin, Li Xianting "On abstract aesthetic consciousness in Classical Chinese Painting" (*Taolun Zhongguo gudian de chouxiang shenmei yishi*), Xu Shucheng "My Ideas on Abstract Beauty" (*Ye tan chouxiang mei*), Zhai Mo "Abstract but Image" (*Chou er you xiang*), Mao Shibo "Preliminary Explorations of Abstract Elements in China's Traditional Art" (*Wo guo chuantong zhong chouxiang yinsu chutan*), Yang Aiqi "On abstraction of Painting" (*Za tan huihua zhong de chouxiang*), Huang Yongping "About my Paintings" (*Tan wo ji zhang hua*).

39 Andrews, Gao, 1993 p 7.

40 Andrews, Gao, 1993 p 7.

41 The magazine published 22 issues until its closure in 1987. It covered important subjects such as theoretical explorations, the future of art, and recent studies in art.

42 *Jiangsu Pictorial* is one of the most influential magazines in promoting the '85 New Wave.

43 Shuang Mu, 1989.5.29, p 4.

44 Pictures of the congress and other events in the 1980s can be found in publications such as Lü Peng 1992, Liu Xiangdong 2006.

45 The film *Frozen (Jidu hanleng)* from 1997 by Wang Xiaoshuai, made under pseudonym 'Wu Ming' (literally 'no name') is exemplary of the spirit of performances staged at the time.

46 Zhao Yiheng Henry, 1993 analyzes three main trends: Roots-Seeking, Avant-Garde, and Stray Youth literature.

47 The overview of poets, writer, artists, filmmakers, and critics in *Our Generation (Women zhei yi dai)* is testimony to the spirit of the time: Xiao Quan, 2006.

48 A large-scale exhibition of Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg was held in Beijing at the National Art Museum of China in 1985. Rauschenberg also gave a speech at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in Beijing. China Art Weekly no 22, 1985 published a review of the exhibition. This exhibition deeply influenced the development of new artistic trends in China.

49 Lee Leo Oufan 1991, p 14.

50 Yi Ying in Barmé, Chang 1993, p XLIV.

51 Gao Minglu's article analyzing the developments of oil painting since 1978 from the point of view of style was published in *Meishu* no 7, 1985. He assigned schools like 'Scar Painting' (*Shanghen huihua*), 'Aestheticism' (*Weimei zhuyi*), 'Rustic Naturalism' (*Xiangtu ziran zhuyi*) and 'Mannerist Style' (*Jiaoshi feng*).

52 Since the opening up of China, artists have worked and participated in art groups and even tend to live in clusters. Since the 1980s, artists' communities exist all over China and this tradition continues today. Examples are in Beijing Yuanmingyuan, Dongcun, Songzhuang, 798 Art Zone (Yishuqu), Moganshanlu in Shanghai, and others in Chongqing, Chengdu, Nanjing, Shenzhen, Yunnan, Hunan, Guizhou. See also: Yang Wei, Wei Bin, 2008.

53 *China Art Weekly/Zhongguo Meishu Bao* no 18, 1985 published 'The Spirit of the North Art Group' which can be seen as a public announcement of the group's artistic intentions and views. Shortly after this publication, the activities of the North Art Group became influential. Shu Qin proposed concepts such as 'North Civilization' (*Beifang wenming*) and 'Cold Zone Culture' (*Handai wenhua*) and illustrated the principles of producing Rationalist Painting (*Lixing huihua*).

54 The Pond Society statement is published in Gao Minglu, 2008, p 198.

55 Liao Wen in Barmé, Chang, 2001, p LII.

56 Wang Guangyi joins the 'North Literature and Art Information Exchange Center' (*Beifang wenxue yishu xinxi jiaoliu zhongxin*) and suggests changing the group's name into 'North Art Group' (*Beifang yishu qunti*). The announcement of the new group was published in the second issue of *Meishu Sichao* in 1985.

57 Lee Leo Oufan 1991, pp. 13–14.

58 Pictures in Fei Dawei, 2008, pp. 37–39.

59 Picture in Lü Peng, 2010, pp. 866–867.

60 Pictures in Lü Peng, 2010, pp. 905 & 984.

61 Gao Minglu, 2005, p 65.

62 Pictures in Lü Peng, 2010, pp. 879 & 907.

63 Fei Dawei, UCCA, November 5, 2007 – February 17, 2008.

64 Wu Hung, 2010, p 95.

65 Picture in Lü Peng, 2010, p 860.

66 In the retrospective exhibition held at the Ullens Center UCCA in Beijing in 2007–2008, several artists like Li Shan and Yu Youhan stated in interviews with Fei Dawei that Taoist influences had inspired their work in the 1980s.

67 Driessen, Mierlo, van, 1997, p 37.

68 Liao Wen in Barmé, Chang, 2001, p LVII.

69 Leo Oufan Lee, 1991, p 22.

70 Fei Dawei, 2007.

71 In 2007, Fei Dawei curated the *'85 New Wave* exhibition in UCCA, Beijing. It was in some ways a retrospective of evolutions in the art scene during the 1980s, including work of the '85 New Wave artists, and some works from the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. Interviews with the artists were available on audio-devices, highlighting their memories from the situation in the 1980s such as the total absence of understanding of the commercial value of art. See also: Fei Dawei, '85 New Wave. The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art, UCCA, *Shiji chuban jituan, Shanghai renmin chubanshe*, 2007.

72 On June 13, 1993 the 45th Venice Biennale opened with the first participation of experimental artists from China. Art critic Li Xianting and artists Wang Youshen and Wu Shanzhuan took part in a satellite exhibition *Open '93*, in the Apperto section of the Biennale at the Arsenale, curated by Kong Chang'an.

73 The titles of these books are reminiscent of restricted publications – the *hui pi shu* (gray cover books) and *huang pi shu* (yellow cover books) – from during the Cultural Revolution that were only distributed among party members and contained, for instance, foreign literature that was forbidden in China. See also: Kong Shuyu, 2002.

74 Ai Weiwei, 1994.

75 Picture in Lü Peng, 2010, p 919.

76 Wang Keping's sculpture *Idol* made in 1978 and exhibited in the Stars exhibition can be seen as the first critical re-appropriation of the image of Mao Zedong. See: Dal Lago, 1999, p 51.

77 Barmé, Chang, 1993, p 29.

78 Art critics such as Xu Hong minimize the impact of artistic trends like Political Pop in Chinese art as a whole: “Looking at a leopard through the bamboo tube, you can only see one spot”. Xu Hong, 1994, p 35.

79 Hay J., “Zhang Hongtu/Hongtu Zhang: An Interview”, in; J. Hay (ed.), *Boundaries in China*, London, Reaktion Books, 1994, p. 297, quoted in M. Chiu, *Breakout. Chinese Art Outside China*, Milano, Edizioni Charta, 2006, p 63.

80 Li Xianting in Barmé, Chang, 1993, p 11.

81 Li Xianting in Barmé 1996, pp. 44–45.

82 Barmé 1996, p 45.

83 Gao Minglu, 2005, p 49.

84 *Liumang* can be translated as rogue, hooligan or vagabond. Akira, 1996, p 86 argues that this attitude has existed in China throughout history as a reaction to the authoritarian political climate.

85 Liao Wen in Barmé, Chang, 2001, p LVIII.

86 According to Li Xianting, Western artists like Lucien Freud and Balthus inspired the Cynical Realism artists.

87 Pictures of the event in: Ding Yi file, Special Collection Room, AAA, Hong Kong.

88 Ding Yi, in Pederson, 2002, p 38.

89 Ding Yi, in Manbo, Skira, 2009, p 71.

90 Fang Lijun, Chang Tsong-zung, *Life Under the Sun/Hong taiyang xia de rizi*, in Kosararova, 2008, pp. 13–15.

91 The article was published various times in several magazines. A later version of the original article is published in He Xiangning Art Museum, 2002, pp. 128–131.

92 Feng Mengbo, in Asian Art News, Vol 13, no 4, July/August 2003, p 41.

93 Jeanne Boden’s interview with Geng Jianyi on July 29, 2011 in Hangzhou close to the China Academy of Arts.

94 Li Shan, unpublished, quoted in Fei Dawei, 2008, p 113.

95 Li Shan, in Zhang Pingjie, 2006, p 13.

96 Liu Wei, in Cantz, 2006, p 314.

97 Liu Wei, in Cantz 2006, p 314.

98 http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=96 (the full interview transcript is available in Mandarin. I translate what is relevant).

99 http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=96

100 http://www.echinaart.com/artist/SunLiang/SunLiang_article.htm (consulted 25/04/2011).

101 Wang Guangyi on http://www.artzinechina.com/display.php?a=72&lang=en (consulted 17/07/2011).

102 Wang Ziwei’s statement in his file in AAA Special Collection Room (consulted August 2010).

103 Xu Bing on Cultural Animal: A Case Study of Transference, Goodman, 1998, p 15.

104 Jeanne Boden’s interview with Xu Bing on April 18, 2011 at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

105 http://www.womenofchina.cn/Profiles/Artists/7268.jsp (consulted 22/10/2010).

106 http://www.womenofchina.cn/Profiles/Artists/7268.jsp (consulted 22/10/2010).

107 Zhu Xiaowen, Quadrio, 2008, p 56.

108 Formerly known as the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts.

109 Zhang Peili in Gladston, 2009, pp. 52–58.

Yu Youhan, *A Human Being Intrinsically Dies*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 110cm ▶

Chapter 3
Post-social:
Chinese art from socialist to post-socialist

3.1 Introduction

Despite the rapid economic modernization of recent decades, China remains a one-party state and central government continues to control Chinese society. The all-encompassing presence of the government and the Communist Party in society extends to the art world.

During the Maoist period between 1949 and 1976, the standards to which art had to comply were imposed in an authoritarian way. After opening up in 1978 the climate liberalized. Artists challenged the official climate, and negotiated their position in it. Evolutions in art during the 1980s largely happened within the realm of official institutes. From the 1990s onwards, internationalization and commercialization occurred. Today, a commercial art market has extensively developed and numerous private galleries exist in China, but the government still keeps an eye on what happens and even plays an active role in it. Chinese artists are aware of this and continuously (re)-negotiate their position. The relationship of Chinese artists and the art world in general with the government is much more complex than complying with or revolting against the system. Chinese artists, critics, curators, and gallery owners work within that context and are well versed in dealing with it and doing what they want to do albeit within the permitted framework, which is continuously changing in tandem with new policies. The limitations the government imposes do not so much exist on the level of art creation, but on the extent to which art can be shown and communicated in society. The art scene in China can be viewed as layered, with the official art institutions – where politics is at play and where officials decide which artists are promoted internationally – and commercial and private galleries connected to the international art market, where a lot more freedom exists and where the economy is at stake. In fact, the art scene in China is a perfect reflection of the country's economy.

Although many Chinese, including Chinese artists, do not seem to be overly interested in politics today, governmental discourse and policy remain integral parts of the art

scene. State control has loosened, but not disappeared. It exists at various levels, such as the curriculum in art schools, in art exhibitions, as well as on the art market. For Chinese artists, political control is part and parcel of being a Chinese citizen and of being an artist. Certainly, it would be strange if the educational and socialist aspects of art suddenly disappeared with the move from a socialist to a post-socialist context. However, state control does not only imply limitation; it can also mean support. The government is well aware of the international success of contemporary Chinese art, its economic value, and of the impact Chinese art has on perceptions of China on a global scale. Therefore, the government now supports contemporary art in many ways. Inside China, the gap between what happens in private commercial galleries and what happens in government supported museums and institutions is apparent. The government also plays an active role in the internationalization of Chinese art.

We here investigate the post-socialist condition of China as it evolved after opening up. But before we turn to art, we will first look at two political events in China's recent history that had major impact on artist's lives and careers, on their artistic choices and languages, and in some cases, on their decision to become an artist. Firstly, there was the Cultural Revolution between 1966–1976, and secondly, the June Fourth Tiananmen Incident in 1989. After considering the impact of these political events, we turn to art. We briefly outline the imposed standards of Socialist Realism during Maoist times and the consequences for the position of art and culture in general, and for the individual artists.

China's central government wants to maintain a dominant discourse and the art world is part of that. Since opening up, the general climate in China has fluctuated back and forth between more open and more restricted. The content of the dominant discourse has also shifted over time. In the 1980s, artists reacted strongly against rigidly imposed policies and broke away from them. As time passed, and as China sought a new equilibrium, artists developed more subtle attitudes towards their recent past.

Many of the artists in this book have a complex relationship with the Maoist period and with the standards set for art at the time. We will explore this complexity between individual art creation and dominant discourse.

After considering the complexity of the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 event, we will look at innovations in artist's work during the 1980s and the experimentation that led to many new artistic languages, methods and content. We will also investigate the move from socialist to post-socialist and how artists deal with the Maoist legacy. Finally, we will explore their position as artists in the Chinese art world today and how they interact with the post-socialist context.

3.2 Impact of political events on artists

Two political events in recent history affected all of China. The first was the Cultural Revolution during which old Chinese culture needed to be destroyed to make room for a new China. The second was the crackdown following the demonstrations on Tiananmen Square in 1989. The Cultural Revolution lasted 10 years. The Tiananmen Incident lasted a few weeks, but both are equally burnt into the memories of the Chinese. And both had an impact on art.

The specific climate of the Cultural Revolution influenced a number of artists in their chosen vocation. The Tiananmen Square crackdown had a major impact on those who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution and resulted in widespread malaise and a feeling of oppression after the optimism of the 1980s. The liberal climate that had emerged after China opened up and that had been the matrix for the cultural and artistic blossoming came to a sudden halt. At the beginning of the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping encouraged the Chinese to restore their energy and a new era of commercialization and internationalization took off. Nevertheless, both events continue to influence post-socialist society and artists today.

The Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution was dominated by the glorification of Mao Zedong and had a deep impact on society and on each individual. This is still felt today. Known as the ten years of chaos, it was not only a period of paranoia and confusion, but also in some respects a period of freedom and fresh challenges. Various artists refer to it as an era of political indoctrination on the one hand, and a kind of freedom or anarchy on the other. Cultural Revolution propaganda provided a rich source of artistic icons for artists including Wang Guangyi, Feng Mengbo and others. For some, the Cultural Revolution influenced their decision to become artists. The creation of propaganda posters required artistic talent and this was exactly how some artists began their career.

Feng Mengbo and Sun Liang explain how, even at the height of the Cultural Revolution, art teachers tried to bring their own agenda to students, including traditional Chinese art. In spite of tight controls and ideological indoctrination, we can understand from their stories that there was a current of underground activity, consisting of teachers secretly providing officially forbidden information and artists copying books by hand.

Looking back at the Cultural Revolution, Li Shan remembers the hysteria of the Mao cult. Li Shan initially studied languages at Heilongjiang University, but he wanted to study art. In his native area there were no possibilities to do this, so he looked for alternatives. However, during the Cultural Revolution only a few art schools accepted students, so he ended up in Shanghai. In his twenties at the time, Li Shan describes the authoritarian situation in art school and the tightly controlled curriculum. "At that time there were so many things I was ignorant of. I did not know what Expressionism was for instance, and still my work had that kind of flavor. Our assignments strictly followed the standards of Russian Realist tradition (...) I remember the first landscape I painted. I did not think it was art, but already I encountered problems (...) the teacher said: 'How can a tree be purple? How can the sky be yellow? You should not be blind, if you do not understand you have to study harder. People who do not understand should follow the teacher closely.'

But that kind of criticism was not so bad. A step further was the politically inspired criticism. The teacher continued: 'You are a village child from the North. You are very simple. Big Shanghai is a lively capitalist place. You should not absorb the capitalist influence. You are simple. You should not let yourself be poisoned by this. You should respect yourself. I can already see the capitalist influence in your work.'" [1]

Li Shan also tells other anecdotes that illustrate the extent of restrictions: "We read mainly Mao Zedong's books and some Soviet literature. There was nothing else (...) Once when the lights in the dormitory were turned off at ten o'clock, one of the students was missing. We all had to look for him. We found him squatting in the toilet reading *The Dream of the Red Chamber/Hong Lou Meng*. It became a major incident in the school – someone reading *Hong Lou Meng*. This was the situation in 1964." [2]

Hong Lou Meng is a classic novel of Chinese literature. For centuries it had been recognized as one of its finest examples. During the Cultural Revolution it was disapproved of. Today it once again belongs to the national pride. But in Maoist times there was no room for anything but the prescribed standards.

Yu Youhan was also in his twenties when the Cultural Revolution started. He remembers it as a period of paranoia and chaos during which people were too easily prepared to believe the propaganda fed to them. "I grew up during the reign of Mao Zedong. He had a great influence on my early years. Mao wanted us all to follow his way of thinking. There was maybe some good in his ways because he wanted us to understand the masses, the farmers. But the Cultural Revolution brought a lot of chaos, teachers did not teach anymore. I spent 3,5 years in the countryside. Mao left his imprint on my brain. The Cultural Revolution had a massive impact. We did not question Mao Zedong in any way for a long time. That all changed when Lin Biao had his accident. We then started to realize that there was something wrong. We started to have our own thoughts. This was at the beginning of the 1970s. In our thoughts we opposed many things. We did not believe the stories anymore. We questioned everything we heard. We

realized it but we could not talk about it. Mao Zedong made some serious mistakes. The Hundred Flower Campaign was a nice idea, but Mao did not let flowers bloom and anyone who had opened his mouth was criticized afterwards. Mao wanted us to destroy so many things. It is easy to destroy but it is much more difficult to build something. To keep people ignorant seems to have been the goal, either you were ignorant or you knew, but if you knew anything you could not talk about it. That is the case until today in fact. But China is very different now from the time of Mao Zedong. In Mao's time all of China seemed to be one person, now everything is spread and dispersed." [3]

For Xu Bing, the Cultural Revolution was a traumatic experience because his family was deemed a 'black element'. Consequently Xu Bing was confronted with humiliation. Growing up in an intellectual family on the campus of Peking University, Xu Bing repeatedly witnessed examples of persecution.

But the Cultural Revolution was also an eye-opening experience for him. Being sent to the countryside was a relief from the suffocating environment of the city and an enriching experience. In the countryside Xu Bing was only allowed to read books by Mao. But because he worked hard, he was respected. Xu Bing says that lots of the things that happened to him then, gave him the necessary skills to become an artist. He filled numerous sketchbooks with drawings and ink paintings. The *Five Series of Repetitions* is interpreted as depicting subjects reminiscent of Xu Bing's youth spent working on the farms of Hebei. Despite being sent to labor in the fields, Xu Bing thought fondly of the countryside and depicted ponds with tadpoles and fields of vegetables and grains in his prints.

Somehow the Cultural Revolution influenced Xu Bing to become an artist. He clearly recalls that when his parents were criticized, he had to prove he was a worthy person: "The reason I so actively participated (in these propaganda activities) is that my family was deemed a 'black element' because of their close relationship with capitalists. This kind of lineage meant we needed to be 'reformed', so I had to do something to be an

active part of the revolutionary spirit. For me painting became the way in which I could show people that I was worthy of being part of this new movement and that I was actively trying to 'reform' myself. My father was sent to prison, and my mother had to be reeducated at a school to be cleansed of bad elements. With both of my parents absent from home, we had no money, not even enough food (...) I was about eleven or twelve at the time. I was very excited because as an idealistic youth, I thought I would get to leave the city, my parents, and the hardship of city life (...) There were not enough teachers, so students taught other students. I had to teach art classes and calligraphy classes, and so forth. This was also based on Mao's philosophy that the power structure of teacher-student relationships needed to be changed. His method was to use the students to break this habit. [Mao] was more like a Chinese sage, a wise man, so to speak.

During this period, whenever you saw statements made by Mao or Lenin or Marx, they were always expressed in bold letters. You could find diverse styles and, just by looking at them, you could also find the hierarchy of the importance of the messages. So, I am very sensitive to calligraphic styles. The directives would come from the teachers who belonged to a group called the Political Work Unit (...) I was just an instrument used to communicate the party's information in the best manner. I didn't feel like an artist at all. The official policy was against individualism.

The farmers and people in the countryside didn't really care about your family background as long as you worked hard. They thought that you were willing to live and work hard in the countryside, so they actually respected you for being there.

To me, those three years were my favorite, golden, and best years of my life because I got to do what I really wanted to do. I didn't like city life because of politics and my family background, which had brought many negative experiences. In the countryside, that was not an issue at all. It was all about interactions between human beings, and you could really feel the goodness of humanity, and people transcending politics, hierarchy and class.

I gained my skills as a painter and artist at this time (...) It was also the time when I started to become a 'contemporary artist,' although I had no idea what contemporary art was. But in a sense, lots of things we did gave us the skills necessary to be artists, and also the spirit of 'avant-gardism'. Maybe Mao was even more avant-garde than most artists."[4]

Xu Bing not only remembers how ideological campaigns brought a lot of confusion. Even language was disrupted by the simplification of the Chinese characters: "Mao was promoting simplified characters. We spent a lot of time memorizing new words. Then they would change the words the next year. And then they would change them again. It was really confusing. Not only with respect to language but also culturally."[5] It may therefore be no coincidence that Xu Bing chose to explore the possibilities of language and communication as an artist, because since a young age he was confronted with the complexity of communication and continuously changing discourse and requirements.

Xu Bing recalls: "During the Cultural Revolution, daily speech became inflected with the language of propaganda, which people today criticize as the 'four rhetorics': the rhetoric of official jargon, overblown rhetoric, empty rhetoric, and throw-away rhetoric (*si hua: guan huan, da hua, kong hua, fei hua*). In my own experience, this feeling of a culture being turned upside down was particularly pronounced (...) There were the years when we could no longer read whatever we chose. We read [only] Mao's Little Red Book (...) The promulgation of new character after new character, the abandonment of old characters that I had already mastered (...) shadowed my earliest education and left me confused about the fundamental concepts of culture."[6] Xu Bing even sees the Cultural Revolution as responsible for his generation's relationship with books: on the one hand they were cut off from many things, while on the other they were forced to read the same thing over and over again. "During my school years, China was still in the midst of the Cultural Revolution and no books were available. I only started reading after returning from the countryside. My generation lacked cultural familiarity with books and

we had an awkward relationship with them. Fearing books and words while at the same time admiring them, we never had the sensation of entering their world. When I was at university, I didn't spend my time painting; instead, I was reading all kinds of books, participating in salons and cultural activities. A feeling of exasperation often occurs after too much reading, like a hungry person who has had too much to eat."[7]

Born in 1957, Zhang Peili was nine years old when the Cultural Revolution started. He lived through the Cultural Revolution as a young boy, fully experiencing its impact. He was very much concerned with the ideological impact on and the political control over the individual. It was a traumatic and confusing experience that influenced him to become an artist: "Politics have influenced me from the moment I was born until now. There is always control and that is the long-term problem in China. I live here. During the last 30 years there is more freedom. When I was young I thought this was the best place in the world to live. I think my mother and father were also convinced about that. That is what I think; we never really talked about it. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution was like one big party. There was no criticism. Everyone was very excited. We could criticize our teachers; we did not have to go to any lessons. We thought China was really magnificent (*Zhongguo hen weida*). My parents were also excited. A lot of things were happening. Our childhood was totally different from Chinese children today. We had no pressure at all.

But at a certain point we started to realize things were wrong. We realized that they were telling us stories and we could not stand it anymore. Starting from 1974 we felt it had to stop. It was not real anymore. So many things were fake. Everything changed when Li Biao had his accident. We did not believe anything anymore. We thought it was absolutely crazy that we had to criticize Confucius. He had lasted for 2000 years! We did not understand it, until we understood it was Zhou Enlai who was under attack.

My elder sister was sent to the countryside – to Heilongjiang. I remember my father crying when she left. The relationship with Russia was very tense at the time and we

thought there would be war. She stayed there for five to six years before she succeeded in coming back. I did not have to go because the regulation was that if you had two children one could stay, the other one had to go. If you had three it was a bit more complex. If you had four children two had to go. There was no food there. It was cold. One day my sister was even attacked by a wolf.

Many families came under pressure. We had a neighbor who had come back from the UK after studying there. He gave English lessons. One day he was severely criticized. My father looked for someone who could teach me some art. He found a friend who was a woodcutter. That person taught me many things."[8]

Zhang Peili recalls this time as extremely complex. In some ways it was quite fun, yet in others it was appalling. When he was little, he saw people fighting. Both his grandfather and father-in-law were shot in the 1950s. But children were allowed to take the train to go anywhere in China for free; they could criticize their teachers, they could skip classes, and no one would say anything. Parents were always in meetings and had no time for them. It felt like a time of absolute and total freedom, and good fun. This fun aspect changed on the day when Zhang Peili saw what happened to the parents of his neighbors when they were criticized. He then became scared it would happen to his own parents.

Zhang Peili clearly remembers the terrible destructive nature of the time: "My grandfather studied in Japan. But after the establishment of the People's Republic he was shot. (…) But then the Cultural Revolution came and all old things needed to be destroyed, so we burnt all the books. Suddenly all books, films and music were bad. I remember the Red Guards coming to the house of a neighbor and smashing old sculptures."[9]

Zhang Peili also remembers the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, when life returned to normal, but the destruction could not be undone: "After the Cultural Revolution there was a big problem. So many things were destroyed. I started to be interested in

Buddhism and Taoism. I used to go to the temple and discuss with the monks. I was also interested in Christianity. I think it is too simple to say we need to return to the past. We cannot return. To say that is political rhetoric. There can never be a return, but we can look for a way to mix our tradition with modern evolution."[10]

Wang Guangyi was also nine years old when the Cultural Revolution started. He refers to the Cultural Revolution as a period that deeply traumatized many people, but for him it was also an eye-opener, partly by going through the experience of living in the countryside. "It had positive aspects because it opened people's eyes to new things. It was a period when people thought a lot. For the country in general, of course, it was deeply traumatic, but it also developed certain aspects of art. The Cultural Revolution was neither good nor bad, but full of significance."[11] Mao Zedong had a huge impact and left a deep impression on Wang Guangyi's mind. But he also remembers it as a period with a particular atmosphere: "The Cultural Revolution had a 'Dada' kind of feeling. Anything seemed possible."[12]

The Cultural Revolution influenced Wang Guangyi to become an artist. He began to study art formally at middle school. In 1972 at the age of 15, he was accepted into the art classes given at Harbin's Children's Cultural Palace, which he attended twice a week. Then, in 1974, he was sent to the countryside along with thousands of other high school students to learn from the peasants. Much of his work is rooted in the icons of his childhood.

Likewise Sun Liang was nine years old when the Cultural Revolution started. In 1973, he was sent to work in the Shanghai Jade Carving Factory, with master worker Xiao Haichun, a traditional Chinese painter. He says it was a very difficult time because he was young and everyone was always shouting at him.

Song Haidong was eight years old when the Cultural Revolution started, too young to consciously take part in any revolutionary activities. He remembers that children could do whatever they liked because the schools were closed.

He recalls: "The Cultural Revolution meant that we could play a lot. There were no lessons; we just had a good time. This could be painting, or just playing. In 1977 I was sent to work in the countryside. There was a regulation that if there were several sons in a family, one could stay in Shanghai and the other had to go to the countryside. So I had to go. I stayed there for three years between 1977 and 1980 and I did not like it. We had no freedom."[13] Actually when Song Haidong was sent to the countryside the Cultural Revolution had already finished. He says: "It was called 'farmer's work'. From the moment I arrived I knew it was a mistake."[14] This shows that although the Cultural Revolution officially ended in 1976 the consequences were felt long afterwards.

In 1978 the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art) started to accept students again. Song Haidong's parents asked a relative, Ma Yuru, to help him enter the academy. Ma Yuru coached Song Haidong and in 1980, he passed the entrance exam.[15]

Ding Yi was only four years old when the Cultural Revolution started, so although it is mainly a childhood memory, the period was influential in making him an artist. Images of Mao Zedong and Cultural Revolution propaganda had to be created and this inspired Ding Yi to start painting. "I was at primary school, where there were no art lessons at all. I copied comics and did quite a good job. My classmates told me that I was talented, that I was good at art. But back then, no one knew anything about art or Chinese painting, and even less about foreign art. What did it mean to be talented?"[16] Paintings of Mao and the propaganda posters needed to be refreshed each year, so artists were sent out to work on them. "That's how I began to want to paint pictures."[17] "I enjoyed painting from a very young age. In secondary school we painted a lot of propaganda pictures or we copied artworks. In the second year we really started our artistic practice. At the time, very few students were allowed into art school because the entrance examination had only just been reestablished [after the Cultural Revolution]. There were only two art schools you could attend in Shanghai: the Drama Institute and the Normal University. I did not do very well at the entrance exam so I ended up in the Arts and Craft school

where I studied design. In fact the design profession reinstated entrance exams earlier than art schools, because due to political changes the government needed to open up the market so the need for designers was very high." [18]

Geng Jianyi, who was four when the Cultural Revolution started, mainly remembers the paranoia and propaganda, and the fact that his parents were largely absent. This left them as children free to do whatever they wanted. "My parents were rarely at home because they always had to go to meetings, so we could do whatever we wanted because no one really looked after us." [19]

The Cultural Revolution was a very traumatic experience for Fang Lijun. Although he was only three years old when it started, the fact that his family had the 'wrong background' and were considered an anti-revolutionary element in society, he experienced the impact and consequences of government policies on everyday life firsthand. The Cultural Revolution meant continuous humiliation, attacks and paranoia in the family: "One day, when just like the adults I was shouting for the overthrow of who knows who, my grandfather was forced onto the stage. Around his neck was a placard with the words 'Landlord Fang'. I was a little shocked by this. In some ways you had to have two systems in your head. One was being told your family was bad; the other was the warmth you felt towards them." [20] Sometime later, Fang Lijun remembers slogans painted on the back wall of their house "in letters taller than me saying 'Down with Landlord Fang.' A crowd of poor children yelled out 'Down with Landlord Fang'. Our back window became a window of hatred from the poor and we were constantly beaten." [21]

All these experiences gave Fang Lijun a sober view on life and on the nature of human beings. He was shocked by what human beings were prepared to do in the name of ideology and the extent of criminality they were ready to engage in: "It is not so terrible to propagate hate. What is terrible is that so many people readily accept it (...) We should not doubt whether we have the ability to distinguish flowers from poisonous

weeds. We just need the courage to admit that human crimes do not necessarily exist within us to a lesser extent than human intuition." [22]

Fang Lijun not only saw the bad side of human nature; he also noticed the smile on his grandfather's face when Mao Zedong died. This confirmed how complex human relationships and relationships with power were and how fake the propaganda was. "In 1976, Mao Zedong died. When my father quietly passed on the news to my grandfather, I saw a fleeting smile on his face that was impossible to hide." [23]

The Cultural Revolution also influenced Fang Lijun to become an artist. To make sure he stayed at home, his father bought him a book of white paper and thick pencils and introduced him to Cao Zhenhuan who taught him to draw. Because of the continual criticism of his family, Fang Lijun's ambition was to draw well enough to make propaganda for the trade union. He copied a picture of Li Yuhe from the revolutionary 'Red Lantern' opera and learned to make art in the Social Realism style.

It was during the Cultural Revolution that Fang Lijun made his first artistic steps and the pictorial language of that time greatly influenced him. After the Cultural Revolution, Fang Lijun began his artistic career: "I was happy. I had finally got into the art group at school and had Wang Yongsheng as a teacher (...) Another teacher, Liu Jingsen, registered me in the art course at the Hebei Light Industry College. I made good progress and then had Li Xianting as a teacher. I took part in the China National Art Exhibition and entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing." [24]

Wang Ziwei was three years old when the Cultural Revolution started and has no memories of it.[25]

In contrast, for Liu Wei, although born in 1965 and only one when it started, the Cultural Revolution is a childhood memory. His father was a PLA officer. Therefore, the presence of the Communist Party, socialist ideology and the images and influence of Mao Zedong and other political leaders were part of his everyday life and that of his family.

Feng Mengbo was born in 1966, the first year of the Cultural Revolution. He remembers the confusing atmosphere: “One song from my childhood goes, ‘I am the same age as the Cultural Revolution’, and we were proud to sing it. With this movement, Chinese culture made a clean break and so-called feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism were swept onto the garbage heap of history. On the one hand, we were taught to say that China had a history dating back five thousand years; on the other we were encouraged to ‘destroy the four olds and build the four news’. It was confusing (...) The strange thing is that in such a chaotic time, my elementary school continued to give calligraphy lessons. We traced printed revolutionary slogans, but we also copied calligraphy by old feudal favorites like Ouyang Xun, Yan Zhenqing, and Liu Gongquan, and there was no way to inject revolutionary content into the work of these old masters.” [26] He also noticed how teachers tried to insert their own agenda into the propaganda by referring to old masters like Bada Shanren, saying things like ‘these shabby paintings have something to them’.[27]

But as a child he also loved the symbols he grew up with. “When I was a young boy, we were so poor that to save money my father made me a bed. It was not simply utilitarian; he shaped it with beautiful lines. I also remember how carefully he carved a five-pointed star for me, knowing how much I loved the symbol, and how my whole family got involved in carefully painting the star red.” [28]

Feng Mengbo was aware of the paranoia in society at the time, but the Cultural Revolution propaganda he grew up with was like a fairy tale: “When I was young, everything was a performance.” [29] His positive memories include going to Revolutionary operas and the actor Yang Zirong was one of his heroes.

Today we can recognize the symbols and heroes Feng Mengbo grew up with in his artwork. He dresses the characters in his games as PLA army soldiers with red stars on their hats and Yang Zirong appears as the hero in several of his games.

The Cultural Revolution also influenced Feng Mengbo to become an artist. “Although the political movements were time-consuming, my schoolwork was good enough that it could afford to wait a bit. So I was often called into the teacher’s office to paint large posters and cartoons, which I drew freehand. My childhood was full of the joys of ink and brush. Upon entering art school, calligraphy and Chinese painting were required courses.” [30]

Feng Mengbo also remembers how difficult it was to depict the deified Mao Zedong: not only because any artist attempting this task had to be a highly skilled technician but also because painting the image of the Great Leader was a serious political mission.[31]

Yu Hong, *Witness, Growing Up* 1966, 1968, 1974, 1983, acrylic on canvas, each canvas 100 x 100cm © Courtesy of Yu Hong

Yu Hong was born in 1966 and the Cultural Revolution is a childhood memory. She is aware of the political indoctrination that colored her upbringing and remembers an education dominated by the thoughts of Mao Zedong, the theory of Deng Xiaoping and the rhetoric of Jiang Zemin. Yu Hong closely links her personal life with political life as an artist. Her work can be seen as autobiographical and as a reflection of the development of the nation. “I was born in the same year the Cultural Revolution started, therefore it had little influence on me. I was a child and I was unaware of

politics. I do remember that my grandfather was criticized and it put the family under pressure, but my family was in Xian and I was in Beijing so although I knew about it, I was never really confronted with it. My relationship with the government is the general relationship all Chinese have. I am aware of it, but in everyday life I am not deeply confronted with it." [32]

Yu Hong's series of paintings *Witness, Growing Up* tells the story of China's recent history through the looking glass of her youth, mirroring her childhood in Maoist times and after the opening up. "People living in Beijing are very politically aware, and although I don't care for that, there are lots of references to politics and ideology in my work. It's the same when I look at my childhood drawings (...) I can't believe how many of them are political." [33] In this series, the juxtaposition of Yu Hong as an innocent child with political imagery renders the mass campaigns absurd. The innocent look of the young girl directed at the spectator highlights the isolation of the individual during this period.

June Fourth 1989

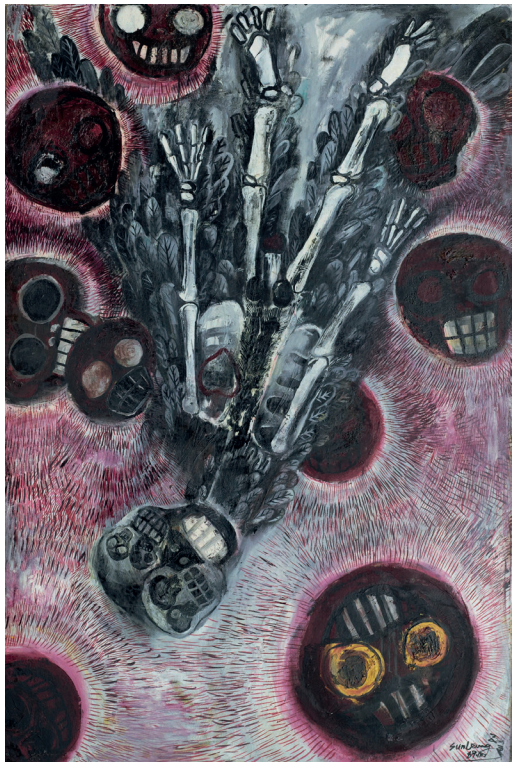
Thirteen years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, another event shook China: the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests on June 4, 1989. This incident was traumatic, not only for the people involved, but also for those who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution. 1989 brought back the fear and anger of former times. June Fourth can be seen as an outburst of social unrest in a country that had changed too rapidly. But the harsh and cruel way the protest was silenced left deep scars. Explicitly or implicitly artists reacted.

For Fang Lijun, already traumatized by the Cultural Revolution, 1989 was a shock, but it also came as a kind of liberation that brought understanding. "The events of 1989 reignited suspicion in me. I felt the same misgivings as when I was a kid. I was fascinated by the protestors who seemed to be fooling around. To make sense of other people, I concentrated on myself. After all I was one of them. If I couldn't make

sense of myself, the next best thing was to try and understand others and to hope whenever I felt I had made some sort of discovery that everything would become a blur again. That was when I began my work." [34]

Sun Liang began to paint gloomy images after 1989. He describes the situation after the crackdown, during which it was extremely difficult to survive as an artist: "We were aware of our lack of knowledge in the early 1980s, and we also came under pressure from the government. Many things were forbidden and when we held an exhibition it would be closed down. Of course we reacted to that. But it was mainly the June Fourth incident in 1989 that opened our eyes. It really upset us. Everything suddenly stopped. We could not hold exhibitions; we could not publish anything, we had no public. Nobody saw what we created. Everything we did was underground. We had a really hard time. I had worked as a teacher but suddenly I could not teach anymore. That lasted for two years. We were desperate after 1989. But I believe that desperate times also have good aspects to them. I thought a lot about why I still wanted to create art if there was no possibility to ever show it to anyone. I came to realize that I do not make art for others; I do it for myself. I have no choice. If I were locked up between four walls I would still be a painter. The situation only changed again in 1992 when Deng Xiaoping told us we had to continue with economic reforms." [35]

The picture overleaf is exemplary of Sun Liang's work during this period. The light and colorful atmosphere that typified his work up until then has been replaced by dark images of skulls and skeletons. Apart from the title of the painting, the mythological world he depicted in the past has disappeared.



Sun Liang, *Icarus and the Nine Suns*, 1989, oil on canvas 180 x 120cm
© Courtesy of Sun Liang

Xu Bing says: "Part of the sadness of *Ghosts [pounding the Wall]* is because of what happened at Tiananmen." [36]

Li Shan's states: "I wanted a new history. I wanted to read. I wanted other people to read. I wanted society to read. That is what I wanted. It had to do with June Fourth 1989. Right after the big exhibition [1989 *China/Avant-Garde*] June Fourth happened. Sometimes people say that Tang Song's [Xiao Lu's] shot [at the opening of the exhibition] was the first shot of June Fourth." [37]

Yu Youhan's *Flowery bicycle* created in July 1989 is also a response to the events on Tiananmen Square. "After the Tiananmen Incident, I created a few works that reflected

my feelings at the time. The bicycle is one of them; I made a few more but I don't want to talk about that in public." [38] The artist does not link his personal life with political life in his work, but he does indirectly express his views. "During the Cultural Revolution, I could not have done this [points at his Mao catalogue]. I would have lost my head. People would have thought I was dangerous, or against something. But in 1989–1990, I could make this. It's playful. I don't want my work to explode like a bomb. I want to have fun. I don't care about labels; I only care about art. I want to paint. When spring comes, a little sprout grows. I like this. Before the sprout grows, I don't think about it." [39] Yu Youhan has painted other critical works such as Mao Zedong after death (see illustrations pages p 95, 158).

3.3 From Socialist Realism to the reality of post-socialism

Socialist Realism as the standard

Speaking at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature in 1942, Mao Zedong made it clear that in the future socialist society he wanted to ensure that "literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind." [40] Art and culture were seen as educational tools to help implement the new policy and ideology.

That policy was implemented from the outset of the communist take-over in 1949. The visual language of art was harnessed to help educate the illiterate masses, implement change and achieve the socialist goal. Art and artists came under state control. The Party – more specifically the Ministry of Culture and the Chinese Artists Association – controlled every step of the process: art education, production, criticism, and exhibition. Propaganda posters were produced and reproduced in their millions and distributed across China. Alternative art forms were criticized and considered to be 'bourgeois'; there was no room for 'art for art's sake'. Artists were not free to

choose an artistic language, method, media or subject. The norms of Socialist Realism dictated an ideological function for art as part of the propaganda machine in a state controlled planned economy.

Song Haidong tried to break away from the officially imposed standards as a sculpture student in art school. Although he was unaware of the term 'installation art' at the time, he created what could be considered installation art. Song Haidong recalls the lack of flexibility: "I studied sculpture at the academy. What we learned was Socialist Realism, which is Russian, not Chinese. We learned nothing about China's tradition. In my third year I began using other materials than clay (the officially prescribed medium). In fact, I started creating installations. This was absolutely not done. They threatened to throw me out of school if I continued, so I had to give it up." [41]

Limiting access to information

Controlling art education not only means dictating what should be taught. It also means discouraging or even blocking access to undesirable information. Several artists recall how access to information about non-Chinese art (except for Russian art) was restricted during the Cultural Revolution, and also afterwards. From the artist's testimonies below we get an understanding of the repressive atmosphere in which artists were educated and worked. We can detect their longing for information and the difficulty in accessing it. In the 1980s, outside information became slowly but surely available, and even more so in the 1990s, but even today access remains controlled.

Li Shan describes how difficult it was to access information about Western art, but in spite of the restrictions, even during the Cultural Revolution, he sometimes had the privilege of viewing officially prohibited books: "Let me tell you the story of Min Xiwen, a teacher who had a major influence on me. We will never forget him. While he was a teacher at the Academy of Hangzhou he was chosen to go to France to study. But when war broke out and the Japanese invaded China, he had to abandon his plans. The artists Wu Guanzhong, Zhao Wuji and Zhu Dequn had already gone to

France ahead of him (...) Min Xiwen taught in our school, but in 1957 he was branded a Rightist. He had to stop teaching and was moved to the art school library (...) In 1964, we often went to the library. But all we got to read were the same Russian authors (...) I went there every day and I really wanted to read new things. Teachers like Min Xiwen realized that. He always gave me the official things to read, but when there were very few or no people around, he would take out books from underneath his desk and give them to me, like books on French Impressionism. At the time I did not fully realize the importance of this." [42]

Xu Bing had some access to French and Russian art during the Cultural Revolution, via his parents' contacts at Peking University. He recalls that they had large collections of Chinese artworks and art books, and one friend had albums of French and Russian art. But he also remembers the lack of access to information about Western art in the 1980s: "At the time I created *Book from the Sky*, Chinese artists had no access to information about Western art. Therefore, everyone was free to fantasize and the predominant idea was that the possibilities in Western art were endless. It could be virtually anything that the human mind was capable of thinking and that in itself was very inspirational." [43]

Song Haidong explains how difficult it was to access information that was not approved by the authorities: "The library at the Academy was known as one of the best in China, but we only had very limited access." [44] He recalls: "Access to European and Japanese avant-garde art only existed in the form of magazines. We could understand the general situation of avant-garde art in Japan, but because it was written in Japanese, we could only look at the pictures (...) The influence was not deep. Everyone looked according to his own interests. For me, Mexican art was relatively influential. I did not look at traditional art in the first place; my interest was more in contemporary art. Access to Western literature was also limited in the 1980s. The library at the Academy had a very good collection but the teachers strictly controlled it. Information about Russian

art was easy to find, so we registered for that to get access to the reading room. Once a student was locked in, other students took photographs of the books and developed them themselves. Some even tore out pages." [45]

Ding Yi describes receiving a copy of a forbidden art magazine from Yu Youhan, which he had to return the next morning. Yu Youhan, already a teacher in the 1980s, understood the importance of information: "If you eat rice every day and one day you get real food it will leave a deep impression." [46]

Ding Yi had a relative working in Japan who sent him art magazines, catalogs and books. Ding Yi was lucky to be in a situation that was not heavily scrutinized. The Chinese government needed designers to create propaganda, therefore the design department had more freedom than other departments: "What we learned about oil painting was very much influenced by Soviet art, but due to the need for new design students, the design department had more freedom and we had a lot of magazines on foreign art." [47] Yu Youhan also helped him to discover other things than the strict official curriculum: "In 1981–1982 there was a retrospective exhibition on Guan Liang in Shanghai. He had studied in Japan in the 1920s and works from Eastern Europe in the 1960s were included in the show. From that exhibition I learned that Guan Liang already knew about Primitivism and Expressionism at an early stage. Later on, I also saw the work of Wu Dayu, Lin Fengmian, and Liu Haili. I was not really interested in art movements such as Rustic Realism in Sichuan. Of course I knew about it because it was published in *Meishu*, but in Shanghai we did not consider it to be very influential. I thank my artistic awakening to my teacher Yu Youhan. He did not teach me directly, but once I participated in one of his classes when he was teaching my friends. They were discussing Impressionism. After this I got to know him and I borrowed some magazines from him. At the time it was not easy to be open about such things with teachers, for example, about the magazines that were sent to me from outside China. Yu Youhan lent me some of the magazines but I had to return them the next morning at eight o'clock.

I did not sleep that night. I copied the work from the magazines all night. When the lights were turned off at 10 pm in the dormitory I went to the cafeteria to continue copying." [48] Ding Yi had to wait until 1993 before he could see Western art with his own eyes.

Feng Mengbo saw the 1985 Rauschenberg exhibition in Beijing. He explains why this exhibition was so special in China: "We studied Russian, French and Greek art, also modern art. But art history stopped at the beginning of the 20th century. We had no information about what happened after that, we needed to find that out by ourselves." [49]

These statements not only show how difficult it was to get information about non-Chinese art. They also reveal the strong focus on Russian art in the Chinese art curriculum, and how the early period after the opening up was a time of discovery for artists.

Controlling exhibitions

Pre-1978, but even during the 1980s, many Chinese artists could not individually choose if they wanted to be in an exhibition or not. Comments by Li Shan about the organization of the *Twelve Painters Exhibition (Shi er ren hua zhan)* in 1979 explain the different atmosphere before and after opening up. "The impact of the *Twelve Painters Exhibition* was in the set up. Before this exhibition, all paintings were scrutinized before they were allowed into an exhibition. The artists were subject to strict guidelines; an exhibition was always educational. But the *Twelve Painters Exhibition* was different. Artists could choose if they wanted to participate or not, and they chose the artworks themselves. There was no official interference. There was a very relaxed atmosphere during the exhibition. There was music and artists could chat with the public. This was a very new situation. We had never seen anything like it before. I think this was the most important aspect of this exhibition." [50]

The restrictive official conditions that had existed for decades did not change overnight as Ding Yi recounts: "I also remember the exhibitions in Shanghai in 1982, which

were organized as a kind of preparation for taking part in national exhibitions. They included works by Chen Yifei, Fang Sicong and others. However, all these exhibitions were thematic and I remember not being very interested at the time." [51]

Wang Guangyi describes the 1980s as a period of underground art developments. "At the beginning of the 1980s, the whole Chinese contemporary art scene was underground. Each artist worked silently in his own studio. There were practically no possibilities to exhibit or express one's work in public. An 'intermediate zone' existed between artists and the government. Within that 'intermediate zone' artists had the freedom to do whatever they wanted. But as soon as you exhibited or published, the government took action to control." [52] Due to these constraints, experiments in the 1980s like performance and installation art were spontaneously presented in non-formal surroundings, in basements, outdoors, or in private apartments.

Zhang Peili explains his participation in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, a contemporary art exhibition within the walls of a state institution: "When we held the exhibition [in 1989] at the Zhongguo Meishu Guan (National Art Museum of China) I also participated. In spite of the fact that we did things that were outside the government's control, we still had an exhibition in an official museum. We did not have much choice back then." [53]

Following the Tiananmen Incident in June 1989, new artistic and social developments came to a halt and artists had to go underground again. But even in those times of extreme government control, artists went in search of ways to show their work in public. For example, in 1991, Song Haidong and other artists organized an exhibition in a garage. They were not permitted to do this, but the government only found out later.[54]

Feng Mengbo recalls: "After graduation we held small underground exhibitions. They were always low profile. In 1992 I had a solo exhibition. The government did not really understand my work, so they stopped it. There is more freedom now but art is still

controlled and limited in expression." [55] Later, in 1994, artists published books as a means to show their work to the public.

These statements tell us about the tension between government control on the one hand, and the search for alternative underground possibilities to exhibit work on the other. They also suggest it is not so much artistic production but the possibility to exhibit that is limited by prevailing political conditions.

Questioning the role of art

The breaking away from politics and the strictly imposed framework of the Cultural Revolution implied the search for something new. Artists and critics engaged in intensive discussions and debates around art. Methods and artistic languages were discussed, but also the role of art criticism and theory, the position of art in relation to politics and the function of art in society. Sun Liang was at the forefront of promoting Shanghai's contemporary artists, and set up an archive to record their work. Ding Yi, together with two other artists, set up a magazine called *Visual Art (Shijue yishu)*, which showcased contemporary artists such as Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Chen Zhen and Zhang Jianjun. Although the magazine was short-lived, it demonstrated his engagement: "We only published one issue because we paid for everything ourselves and since our economic situation was very difficult at the time it was impossible to continue." [56]

Song Haidong took part in these discussions but not necessarily by attending large congresses. He claims that Shanghai artists were and are more singular than other artists in China. Ding Yi confirms this: "Shanghai artists were known to work individually. There were no art groups; the Shanghai art scene was very scattered. Shanghai artists were not very influential in the big meetings at Huangshan or Zhuhai, they were more concerned with their individual ideas on art." [57]

Zhang Peili actively took part in symposia and published articles stating his views. In 1985, he initiated the *New Space (Xin Kongjian)* exhibition with a group of 14 artists, all

graduates of the Hangzhou Art Academy. Zhang Peili showed his work *Rest Notes* and *Mid-Summer Swimmer*. Geng Jianyi was also one of the major artists in the exhibition, showing his *Haircut Series*. The exhibition was so influential it became known by the name of the exhibition space, *Xin Kongjian*. The *New Space/Xin Kongjian* artists later changed their name to the *Pond Society/Chi She*.

Wang Guangyi was active on a theoretical level, not only participating in theoretical discussions but also publishing articles. The *North Art Group* he established believed that they could overcome both Western and Chinese tradition. There was a communicative dimension to their work, and a clear intent to communicate with society. The mission statement of the *North Art Group* reads as follows: "We do not consider our paintings as ART. They are merely one of the means we use to communicate our thoughts." [58]

Xu Bing read a lot, participated in salons and cultural activities, and published articles presenting his views on art. After a while, he grew tired of the discussions and retreated to the quiet of his studio. This held more appeal to him than attending endless cultural debates on modernism, pseudomodernism and postmodernism amongst young intellectuals in Beijing in the late 1980s.

Not all artists were actively involved in the theoretical debate. For Li Shan, art comes from the inner self; there is not much to say about it: "People involved in art tend not to talk about art, while those who don't engage in art – or those who think they make art – talk about it all the time." [59]

From Liu Wei's testimonies we understand he has no special interest in theory: "Intellectual debates are not my interest. There are people who do that kind of thing, but it's not my sphere … it's not my affair. That's for critics like you. I just worry about the painting." [60]

Naturally some artists engaged more in theoretical discussions than others, but given the number of statements made about art and about the position of the artist, the

heated discussions, and the number of magazines set up and articles written during the 1980s, we may conclude that the involvement of these artists in shaping the artistic climate went far beyond the creation of new art. They all helped to shape a vibrant art scene in China.

Questioning the relationship of art with society

The standards of Socialist Realism demanded the educational engagement of art. This resulted in art being intimately connected with socialist society. The fact that during Maoist times, many artists had to physically participate in labor and farming to learn from the masses, added a component of social engagement to the standards of art. The interaction of artists with the masses was compulsory and intensive.

After opening up, the overall climate in China was liberated. But post-socialist society is still a 'socialist' society and the social role of art in today's China can still be explored in that context.

Questioning the relationship of art with society is also a postmodern idea, and the introduction of the concept of postmodernism certainly influenced discussions about art in China. But as stated earlier, the notion of postmodernism is problematic in the Chinese context. In the 1980s, almost everything was questioned and the only certainty remaining seemed to be the exploration of new things. Therefore, the notion of postmodernism does not cover the complexity of art in China. The relationship between art and society should be investigated in the context of a rapidly changing China after the opening up, with art breaking away from the Socialist Realist standards imposed by Mao Zedong and artists trying to cope with the lightning speed of change in the everyday post-socialist reality in which they lived.

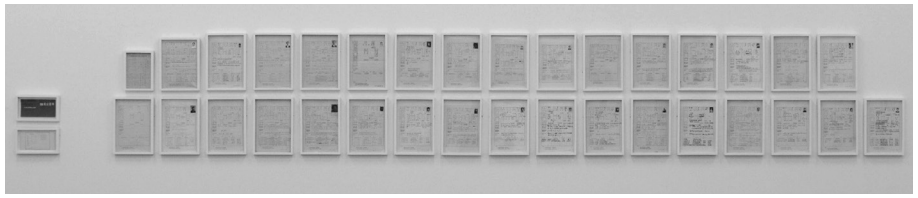
Whether the social dimension of art is a conscious or unconscious process, many artists explicitly refer to society, to their personal environment, and to tendencies in society in general. Their social concern no longer follows the officially imposed

ideology, but questions everyday life and the position of the individual in a totalitarian system.

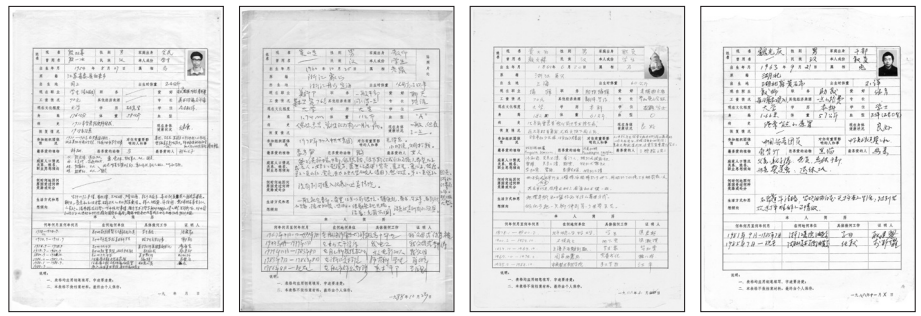
Artists and social engagement

Although we cannot measure the extent to which the social engagement of artists is influenced by the way they were raised and educated, it is interesting to consider the social impact of art in a post-socialist context. Chinese artists do examine their relationship with society, the position of the individual, human relations and power relations. They position themselves in society, interact with their surroundings and engage the spectator in the process, often exploring the awareness of the individual vis-à-vis a state-controlled or bureaucratic society, in some cases exceeding the Chinese context.

Throughout his oeuvre, Geng Jianyi's work has a strong relationship with society. His artwork records and often documents urban life. He observes urban changes in China and the new relationships between people in the urbanization process. But his actions go far beyond registration; he also intervenes. His interventions have the flavor of sociological methods. He organizes quizzes on subjects like marriage law or personal rights and in doing so, he confronts the participant or spectator with his own alienation from the new Chinese reality. He questions the fear of the 'other' and the relationship between individuals and society as a system and in relation to power structures. Geng Jianyi is known for making people aware of processes they normally pay little attention to.



Geng Jianyi, *Forms and Certificates*, 1988, mixed media installation: photography, printed forms, filled forms, certificates
© Courtesy of Geng Jianyi and ShanghArt Gallery



Geng Jianyi, *Forms and Certificates*, 1988 (close ups)
© Courtesy of Geng Jianyi and ShanghArt Gallery

For his intervention *Forms and Certificates*, Geng Jianyi mailed an official looking form to fifty artists who had applied to take part in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. The form requested detailed information on their health, education, marital status, personal inclinations, cultural and political orientation, social and professional status, class, police records, and so on. The form ended with a statement that the data would not be stored in government records, but would be treated as private information. Some artists who received the form believed it was genuine and returned it completed with all the requested information and the required photograph. The completed forms Geng Jianyi received were presented as his contribution to the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. Each form was framed. Geng Jianyi offered the artists a certificate, thanked them for their cooperation and a place in the history of art.[61]

The pictures left and above show the complete *Forms and Certificates* installation plus a few of the forms in close up. Some artists made jokes on their forms, such as the case of Fei Dawei who pasted his picture upside down. Geng Jianyi's work can be read as a critique of bureaucracy and control of the individual in society, but at the same time he questions the role of the artist, the randomness of opportunities to be in or out of an exhibition and to be in or out of the art system. He questions art in its essence. What is art? Who is an artist?

In Geng Jianyi's 1993 project *Marriage law*, twenty participants answered questions about 'The Marriage Law of the PRC' in a classroom at a Middle School in Hangzhou. The piece consisted of some twenty steps, including the completion of registration procedures, concrete decisions of the Supreme People's Court regarding the determination of the incompatibility of spouses in line with the investigation procedures outlined in regulations governing divorce, and 'Regulations Concerning Birth Control'. The entire piece lasted for two hours after which there was a discussion on marriage and family.[62]

In *Reasonable Relationship*, Geng Jianyi negotiated a contract to send a person to Shanghai to witness the urban changes taking place. He financed a one-day trip on the condition that the visitor was able to prove he had made the journey. His work reflected the obsession with justifying the materiality of an evident fact, which confronts the individual with his alienating world.[63]

Geng Jianyi's work is highly representative of the atmosphere in China after the opening up and of recent decades as the country modernizes but political control continues to exist and people tend to automatically comply. His questioning is focused on socialist society in a post-socialist era, where apart from the changing position of the individual in society, the artist and art in general are also changing.

Zhang Peili claims his work is influenced by his personal surroundings. Even in his early work and paintings, he focused on his own surroundings rather than going in search of the exotic, like some of his contemporaries. Zhang Peili calls some of his work the recording of the process of personal self-observation. He observes and records urban lifestyles in large cities and he focuses on commonly seen or experienced illnesses of the individual psyche, especially those that arise as a consequence of abuse, whether self-abuse, or abuse inflicted by others.

Zhang Peili's art often works at an indirect level. He wants the spectator to have a relationship with his work. Even physical reactions in audiences can result from an

interaction between the viewer and the viewed. Familiar images suddenly become distanced in the hands of Zhang Peili: a familiar newsreader from television reads a dictionary instead of delivering news; food and the process of eating filmed in extreme close up evoke feelings of estrangement; images from Cultural Revolution propaganda films so familiar to the Chinese become absurd when sequences are repeated over and over again. The spectator loses his sense of familiarity with everyday life and is left with a sense of loss and disorientation.

Zhang Peili, *Brown Cover Document No.1*, 1988, mixed media installation
© Courtesy of Zhang Peili

Zhang Peili, *Brown Cover Document No.1, 1988*, mixed media installation
© Courtesy of Zhang Peili

For his 1988 project *Brown Cover Document No.1*, Zhang Peili sent medical latex gloves and a letter with instructions to a number of randomly chosen art students at the China Academy of Art. Some of the gloves were intact; others were cut into pieces.

This intervention was meant to have an impact at societal level: “Most people think a virus is something accidental, so it is usually called ‘abnormal’. In my eyes, all kinds of viruses are part of the normal phenomenon of life (...) When observing it carefully, we can discover a strong metaphysical power exists behind it.” [64]

The series of pictures above show Zhang Peili at work during the process of this intervention, writing the letters, wrapping the gloves and posting them. The other picture shows a pair of gloves as they were sent.

Zhang Peili explains what he thinks about the public, the spectators of his work: “I use ready-made video material I buy in the store. It’s an eye massage exercise for schools. It’s a VCD and I use this type of interaction to create a kind of relationship between the audience and the video. Actually I want the video image to be unimportant. It can be important and unimportant. What I’m interested in is the relationship. Generally, I think spectators are the same as artists. They come from different classes and have different understandings of art. So, by seeing these kinds of works, I think it’s possible they have different reactions. (...) Anyway, I find any reaction interesting. The work’s original meaning is about completely accepting any attitude or different type of response to the work.” [65]

Zhang Peili wants the public to react, but he gives them the freedom of interpretation. Whatever the public wants to think or whatever critics want to state is acceptable: “I often think that the way in which my works have been interpreted has nothing to do with me. All interpretations, no matter what kind of theory has been used, are reasonable. I don’t care how my works are interpreted. I think judging a piece of work is just like impressions we have of a person. For example, some people may have the impression that I’m quite rough if they see me quarreling, while others may have the impression that I’m quite shy. If I am not totally sure of the significance of my works, how can other people be totally sure? However, when the works are interpreted from a different perspective by each individual, all these interpretations

can be thought of as reasonable if they are based on the information provided by the works themselves.” [66]

The work of Zhang Peili, like that of Geng Jianyi, confronts the spectator with his/her position in society but also with the randomness and absurdity of many situations and messages that are taken for granted. When taken out of context, they often seem absurd.

Ding Yi worked in an introspective manner in his early painting career and at first sight there is no connection whatsoever between his abstract paintings and society. But over time, he has become more interested in his paintings reflecting the world outside, having a connection with society, and the profound changes taking place in Chinese society have begun to influence his ideas: “I was painting from what was inside me, according to my own development, my own ideas. But since 1999 I have been reacting much more to my environment, things outside me. In Shanghai, the colors on the street, in advertisements and so on, are all fighting. This is not a peaceful city. There is shouting and excitement everywhere. Now I want my work to express this reality.” [67] Ding Yi has also done performances and has been involved in a number of architectural projects and installations interacting with the public. “Art has to enrich the public. That’s why I started creating more interactive projects that have a lot to do with installation art and architecture. Such as *Time-Space Post Office*, which could be seen in 2006 and now in Bologna.” [68]

Fang Lijun says he is copying from life because “what touches people the most in art comes from life, not from theory.” [69] The baldheads in his early work may be inspired by a photograph of farmers working in Taihang Mountain, east of Hebei Province, but Fang Lijun uses the baldhead because it has many possible connotations, including a monk or a prisoner. Fang Lijun has experienced the harshness of life. After graduating from the Academy, he moved to Yuanmingyuan artist’s village, where he tried to survive: “Without a job, painting and searching for the right kind of portraits ... My greatest

desire was to have 20 Renminbi so that I could buy a box of instant noodles. So I wouldn't starve while I worked." [70]

Fang Lijun uses his own life as the inspiration for his work, depicting himself and his friends, but he seems to express something more universal. "The shaved heads, the mocking expression of the faces, the background devoid of any setting apart from the bright blue sky and white clouds, the use of bright colors, all heighten the sense of the absurd, and yet, at the same time, evoke a feeling of camaraderie with the figures. They become one of us." [71] Fang Lijun created a vast number of paintings where either the sea, water or the sky form the background, with blue being the dominant color. In a way, this has become his artistic brand. The picture below from his early period is exemplary. Whereas artists like Liu Wei (in his early work) and Yu Hong (throughout her career) depict the individual in a realistic manner, all the individuals in Fang Lijun's work seem to look like baldheaded clones of the artist. All personal features have been erased. There is only the de-individualized person depicted in a group, often with a sarcastic smile or an air of boredom.

Fang Lijun uses photographs and drawings as the basis for his paintings, but not necessarily because he is concerned with capturing the realistic features of specific individuals. By using his own environment and capturing the essence of the time, he connects with society.

Fang Lijun, *Series 2* (10), oil on canvas, 180 x 230cm, 1991–1992 © Courtesy of Fang Lijun

In this painting, the men appear to be chasing something. The prominent position of the woman at the center of the painting creates a tension between her and the men. In the two ink paintings shown in Chapter 4 (see illustrations page 203), Fang Lijun also explores relationships between individuals, not only men and women, but also relationships of power. The uniform depiction of individuals in groups and the tension evoked by their positioning and body language can be interpreted as a questioning of the position of the individual in society.

Society and his immediate surroundings are also a source of inspiration for Liu Wei. Especially in his early work, the artist often depicts his personal surroundings, his family and friends in a derisive way. These early works exude a certain cynicism towards society, towards people in power, and towards life itself.

In his later work, Liu Wei paints erotic, rosy, and fleshy pictures that are sometimes shocking. Liu Wei claims he is not concerned with pleasing anyone: "Sometimes people feel uncomfortable with my paintings, they are shocked, but I don't listen to other people's opinions. I'm not interested. It's their business what they think of my paintings (...) I'm not interested in being bound by other people's conventions." [72]

Liu Wei mocks the idea of 'art for the masses' (in which he was indoctrinated) as prescribed by Mao Zedong: "I paint for the laboring masses, the people in general," he says. "I love the laboring masses, it's just that they don't like me (...) Perhaps after being shocked or feeling uncomfortable, people go away and think about it, and perhaps they decide to treat women with more respect. Then my paintings would have a positive social effect." [73]

Although Liu Wei seeks the shock effect, his work reveals social engagement. The artist presents the female figure as the "reverse of male-dominated iconography" [74] in response to the commodification of sexuality in the fast changing Chinese society since the opening up. For Liu Wei, human beings are all the same: "From birth to death, we're

all one person, with no variation in kind, except perhaps our gender, that's all. When he (or she) is born into this world, he's like a peeled egg, hot and steamy and very fresh, even so, like the rest of us, he still eats, drinks, pisses, shits and sleeps." [75] Elaborating on the question mark in the title of his work *You Like Pork?* Liu Wei invites the audience to think about the position of women in society: "Without the question mark, it is something that is simply thrust upon you. The question mark makes it more ambivalent. I hope it makes the audience think and overcome their initial reaction." [76] While claiming not to care what people think about his paintings, by using tactics like the question mark, Liu Wei reveals his social concern and his desire to interact with the spectator, albeit in an indirect way.

Liu Wei, *Untitled*, 1999, oil on canvas, 25 x 20.4cm
© Courtesy of Modern Chinese Art Foundation

This painting of a dog exemplifies Liu Wei's rough brushwork and use of colors. The pink and red are associated in the mind of the spectator with sex, blood, lust and fear. The picture has erotic and aggressive undertones. The dog runs straight at the spectator, with its tongue hanging out, dripping saliva, and provokes the spectator to interact with the image.

Feng Mengbo's art is concerned with the commonplace lives of ordinary people. Interaction with the public is part of his goal. He develops methods to involve spectators in his work and to give them an active role in manipulating it. Once the audience takes part in the game they can no longer be distant observers; they become part of the manipulation and aggression, part of the game.

In his first interactive CD-ROM, *My Private Album*, Feng Mengbo shows generations of his family in juxtaposition with symbols of Maoist China. Born in the year of the Cultural Revolution, Maoist iconography was part of his childhood.

Feng Mengbo, *MPA 02, My Private Album*, 1996, interactive installation, Mac, projector, audio system
© Courtesy of Feng Mengbo and ShanghArt Gallery

Feng Mengbo wants to involve the public: "I wanted to give my audience the freedom to manipulate my work. Because mine is the story of a Chinese family, I felt that an interactive disk would help me break free of the constraints of a linear narrative and bring the work closer to reproducing the palimpsest nature of memory itself. Three generations of my family crowd together in picture after picture and stare at me. Their gaze weighs on me. Birth, old age, infirmity, and death all are reflected here. It is a space we all share. Humankind shares it with nature, its flourishing and decay, its alternating seasons. We don't crave startling changes. Perhaps all we ever wait for is the fresh green of another spring, or the first snowfall of another winter (...) my art is concerned with the commonplace lives of ordinary people." [77]

The artist also wants to explore the human psyche. He wants to confront the public with their hidden desires. According to Feng Mengbo, human beings like or even need violence. They like to play violent games and they like heroes. “Violence is very human; people need violence. The violence you see here is an excuse; what violence really seeks is beauty. Here there’s a reason for each gun and every artillery shell. But of course, if you crack open the head of an old woman on the street, there is nothing beautiful about that!” [78] He raises questions about humanity and aggressive gaming: “Why are there millions of young people who enjoy these videogames? Why do they enjoy figuring in the bloody game of ‘a natural born killer’? (...) You can select the players and weapons, go anywhere you like, and you can shoot anybody on the screen. You feel like Schwarzenegger or Yang Zirong, which makes you feel strong and powerful when you hold the mouse.” [79] Feng Mengbo goes as far as using his own image in games, and by multiplying it, he creates the possibility of his own image killing itself. On the human-machine relationship, Feng Mengbo states: “When I had a chance to play these games, I realized that the interaction between people and machines could be very interesting. It suited my approach to life, my sense of being and the more I explored it, the more it seemed ideal (...) I knew that all my visual experience was secondhand. All the images and icons laid before me had been created and orchestrated by people for me (...) I never saw pure things, not even simple stories, because those we read all had a purpose and an underlying moral message to extract.” [80] Feng Mengbo does not necessarily address Chinese society; his concerns are more universal. But looking at his work we detect a concern for society, for power relations between people and between the individual and power systems.

Society and everyday life is Yu Hong’s main source of inspiration. Since starting to paint, she has depicted her immediate environment and her family and friends. Her narrative plays out in the context of daily life: “I became increasingly interested in everyday scenes of social life and began to paint them: beauty salons, markets, and others. When the time came for us to prepare our final graduation work, most students

wanted to travel to remote minority areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang. But I had really grown to enjoy painting the glamor and chaos of urban life. Having lived all my life in Wangfujing, in the center of Beijing, I was sensitive to any change of fashion. My graduation paintings depicted a crowded escalator and a street scene.” [81] Yu Hong registers what she sees and paints the small stories of life: “Like most of us, I lead a life of trivialities. That’s how life really is.” [82] This has resulted in an oeuvre that can be perceived as a record of recent Chinese history and economic developments, seen through the prism of an individual’s life, in which we grasp the sense of changing times and the human condition. Yu Hong explicitly refers to social changes in China with the official ‘well-off society’ concept after China opened up, and the consequences of these changes, such as spending money or learning English. She shows strong social engagement, public responsibility, and honor to the individual by depicting all layers of society. In her paintings *Witness, Growing Up* [83] she juxtaposes political pictures with images of herself growing up. We see her as a child in the Mao Zedong era, and the political environment is also present in subsequent self-portraits painted each year. From the moment her daughter was born, Yu Hong also began to include international political events each year combined with two pictures, one of herself and one of her daughter. She refers to events like the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999, and 9/11 in New York. She explains: “The idea for *Witness, Growing Up* came to me in 1999. It is very special for me. Since I became a mother, I have observed my daughter’s growth: from a naive girl to a social person. During this cruel progression, she cannot rid herself of the influence of family and society. I consider human development while growing up to be a very interesting process. Therefore, I have combined my own growing up with that of my daughter’s.” [84] The juxtaposition of Yu Hong’s own life with the political context confronts us with the climate in which she grew up (see illustrations page 111).

Xu Bing wants spectators to become involved in his work, to collide with conceptual boundaries and reshape habitual modes of thinking. Xu Bing describes the role of an artist

as follows: “I have always thought that to be an artist, the first thing you must do is clarify what art is and what its principles are. Specifically, you must identify what an artist does in this world and the relationship between yourself, society, and culture. And even more specifically, you must determine your particular commutative relationship with society (…) The artwork itself is a mere lump of materials; is it worth that much? A good artist is a thinking person, adept at translating thoughts into the language of art.” [85]

After Xu Bing moved to the US, his social concern and engagement grew beyond the Chinese context and he became interested in cross-cultural concepts. For example, with his *Square Word Calligraphy* he makes it possible to practice as an English calligrapher using Chinese techniques. He has been involved in many transnational projects such as the Helsinki-Himalayan Exchange in Nepal, and in the *Mu, Lin, Sen* project involving elementary schools in Kenya where his goal was to teach children about participation in a self-sustaining system. His *Tobacco* project analyzes Sino-American relationships and China’s globalization process.

Wang Guangyi’s artwork is always related to society, both Chinese as well as the international context: “What art eventually relates to is the society in which artists live. You live and work in society and you see and feel things. These are all mixed together in your mind to give you inspiration. My art is always related to society. I can’t explain it well but that’s the truth.” [86]

He wants his work to have influence: “I’ve used famous brands in my work for a long time. (…) I used these brands because I thought they had a big influence on China. But with the passage of time, I think this influence is diminishing. Now, art has more and more influence on society.” [87]

Wang Guangyi researches the health of the individual in relation to the structure of the social system, and the impact of society as a collective power on the individual. *Quarantine: All Food is Potentially Poisonous* essentially links the issue of the health

of the individual to the structure of the social system, because it is the social system that controls hygiene. “In fact, I want to use these issues to show the human as a living entity within a social structure, and as a being who experiences a deep sense of insecurity, which comes directly from that social structure.” [88] He wants to express “the kind of distrust that society as a collective power harbors toward the individual. This ubiquitous spirit of suspicion is deeply damaging to the individual’s innermost being.” [89]

Wang Guangyi also refers to geopolitical contexts. “*Passport and Visa* originated from thinking about the whole set-up and approach to visa and passport offices in countries all over the world. In a sense, visas place everyone under the shadow of power struggles between countries, and all people are judged. It could be said that of all the official documents a person has to deal with in his life, from birth to death, the visa is probably the most ideological in nature. It is the molding power of ideology vis-à-vis individual emotion, belief systems and national identity that is exposed in *Passport and Visa*.” [90]

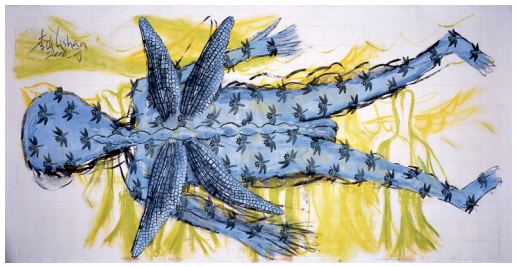
For Wang Guangyi, the position of an artist is to criticize and alert society.

Li Shan claims that art is not connected to society; it comes from inside, from his ‘inner self,’ [91] He states, “art has nothing to do with critics, agents, museums, collectors, the viewing public or the media.” [92] For him, art is a way to express himself, or as he puts it, a way of life.

The painting overleaf represents one of his *Rouge* series. He uses pink, erotic symbols to depict a pomegranate. Apart from evoking certain associations, there does not seem to be an explicit link to society or social engagement.

Li Shan, *Rouge No 9*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150cm
© Courtesy of Li Shan

But, fascinated by genetic manipulation, Li Shan has created work in which he uses photographic prints of insects with parts of his body inserted into their bodies: “In early 2002, the British government permitted a couple to ‘customize’ an infant, and to use the stem cells of this baby to cure a patient suffering from Mediterranean anemia. Human beings are changing the purpose of creating life, from life creating to other ‘usage’. But that is not the point. What will really resonate are the after effects: the attitude of human beings when they encounter a butterfly, fish or any other creature..” [93]



Li Shan, *Reading No 6*, 2006, oil on canvas, 352 x 175cm
© Courtesy of Li Shan

Genetic manipulation is exactly what Li Shan seems to address in the painting above. We can detect a human body covered with butterfly-like creatures. The spine of this body is very prominent with fluid flowing through it. Wings are growing from the person’s back. Black lines surrounding the wings and the body seem to indicate that the person

is vibrating and taking off in flight. In the background we can detect more human shapes. They seem to be lining up for something or watching the person with the wings. Li Shan confronts us with the era of manipulation of nature we currently live in, with all its human and social implications.

Yu Youhan’s artwork does not have any obvious link with society. He puts it very simply: “I painted Mao. Then I painted the people. Now I want to paint what’s at people’s feet: the dirt, the ground. I don’t want to teach anybody anything.” [94] He speaks with nostalgia about quiet bygone times and a life that is unknown in today’s cities. In his words there is human concern: “I went to Yi Meng Shan in 2002. I could go by foot everywhere. There it’s still old China. There are no travelers. The animals are not afraid – maybe you can talk to them! The people are hard, primitive farmers. I am not against all change. Although the Yi Meng Shan villagers have no modern machines and mansions, it is more natural there, more honest. It is a vanishing lifestyle. I miss those people.” [95]

Sun Liang’s work is disconnected from reality. It is based on his imagination and has nothing to do with the world around him. He paints surreal images in which it is difficult to find any clues to current times. His work is neither a token of the times nor a thermometer of social evolution. He paints a world in which the pain and misery of humankind are vanquished. Sun Liang is closed off from reality: “the living environment and everything I experienced is too complicated, difficult, painful and disappointing. Facing the outside world, I am helpless. Only artworks can reflect my heart while I am standing in front of them.” [96] Sun Liang transfers his imagination into his work. “Like a bird, imagination flies and then perches itself on the canvas to leave a mark there, which then extends continuously.” [97]

Nevertheless, even if there is no direct connection between Sun Liang’s work and society, we can see a reaction to outside events in the paintings he created between 1989 and 1990, albeit on a symbolic level. Art critic Wu Lintian agrees that Sun

Liang absorbs social influences and disturbances: “He has attempted many means of expression, all of which were related to his experience of life, living conditions, and his inner self. His earliest works have some connection with expressionism, involving the dislocation of space, mystery, and bizarre figures along with feelings of anguish and helplessness (...) alert to any disturbance from the outside world.” [98]

As we have seen, a number of the artists featured in this book have a clear engagement with society and are concerned with the individual vis-à-vis power, society, and bureaucracy. Others interact with the public and incite them to reflect on society or tackle global concerns.

3.4 Opening up new artistic languages and methods

During the Maoist period, art was closely connected to the ideological transformation of China with the imposed standards of Socialist Realism. The liberalized climate of the post-Mao era created the right conditions for Chinese artists to experiment. The 1980s was a period of new methods, styles and content in painting. It saw the first performance artists, the first video artists, the first installation artists and the first multimedia artists. The variety of artistic languages practiced demonstrates the vibrant atmosphere of the time.

Around the 1985 New Wave period, artists started to explore techniques that had never been used in China before. Many artists engaged in solo or group performances and created art that clearly broke away from the officially imposed standards of the past. This not only resulted in an outburst of new, experimental artworks, but also lively discussions, seminars and publications on art theory and criticism and the role of art in society.

One of the favorite artistic techniques adopted in the mid-1980s was performance art. Confrontational and involving the public, performance art was perceived as the right method to express the dynamism of challenging politically imposed boundaries. Many

artists engaging in performance art were trained as painters. Installations were another way to radically break with the past. A number of interventions combined performance and installation art, such as the *Taiji Series* by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, and the actions of Xu Bing on the Great Wall as described below. Some of these actions were provocative and extreme.

The examples below reflect the huge popularity of performance art at the time.

Song Haidong influenced the emergence of the 1985 New Wave Movement, with its pluralistic dialogue and explosion of new ideas and art forms. In 1986, he established the ‘M’ Art Group, which stands for MAN. This group was known for its extreme performances. Song Haidong explains: “In the 1980s we wanted new things. Together with Yang Hui we decided to set up performances. In fact we did not know anything about performances but we decided to just do what we wanted to do. We worked for about 2 to 3 months before we were ready. There were several of us and everyone just did whatever he felt like doing. The performances took about half a day. We could not do this kind of thing out in the open or in public, so the 60 to 80 people who saw the show were all people we knew.” [99] News of these events was shared by telephone, friends calling friends. Government officials did not criticize the ‘M’ Art Group because they were totally unaware of its existence.[100]

The ‘M’ Art Group event at the Worker’s Cultural Center in Shanghai is considered to be the first piece of performance art in China. The artists had seen basic material about performances outside China, but they knew little else about it. The group members were Shen Fan, Li Zuming, Zhou Tiehai, Yang Guangming, Gong Jianqing, and Yang Hui.[101] Some of the performances were provocative and ritualistic with the artists half naked, bound, hung and beaten. One of the most memorable performances was the self-crucifixion by Yang Hui, who was naked and beaten until he bled from his back. Hu Jianping took pictures during the performance. These images started to circulate and ended up in various publications. The event was

also mentioned in *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* and it made its way into the art history records of contemporary Chinese art.

Sun Liang, who was trained in traditional Chinese ink painting and jade carving, also established his reputation during the 1985 art movement. Almost immediately after graduating, he moved from traditional ink painting to oil painting. But he also engaged in performance art. It was Sun Liang's idea to use the subject of *The Last Supper* for the group performance at the Shanghai Art Museum, inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's fresco of 1498. A number of artists including Li Shan, Sun Liang, Song Haidong and critics Li Xianting and Wu Liang "dressed themselves in light brown cloths and covered their heads with red and black hoods and staged a performance in an underground space. The walls and ceilings were covered with large pieces of cloth. The performance was reminiscent of rituals performed by some kind of secret society." [102]

Ding Yi who began his artistic career in the 1980s mainly as a painter, did performances together with Zhang Guoliang and Qin Yifeng. His performance in 1986 outside the newly built Shanghai museum was meant to be a confrontation with tradition. Although the museum was brand new, to Ding Yi it was symbolic of the traditional culture he wanted to react against: "It represented tradition, while I represented modernity. The performance was planned not so much as a dialogue, but as a confrontation." [103]

In Hangzhou, Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili were at work in 1986, in painting, but also in performances. They wrapped themselves up as *King and Queen* or engaged in secret actions at night: "The Pond Society (*Chi She*) carried out a secret action. They spent a night turning newspaper into papier-mâché and used it the next morning to plaster taiji boxing exercises on a wall outside the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (China Academy of Art). The Work was called *Number One: Yangshi Taiji Series*. In November 1986 they again created taiji figures in cardboard and hung them in trees, naming the piece the *Performer Amidst the Green Colored Empty Space*." [104]

Li Shan delivered a performance at the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. Obviously the most provocative act during that exhibition, which led to it being closed down, was the gun fired by Xiao Lu at the *Dialogue* installation she had made with Tang Song. Li Shan was more cautious. Nevertheless, his comments on his performance *Washing Feet* reflect the sensitivity at the time: "I used a picture of Ronald Reagan in my work. In fact I first wanted to use Mao Zedong's pictures, I had them all printed, lots of them, but I could not do it. If I had used Mao Zedong I would not have been able to be in the exhibition. So I changed. The use of Reagan's picture had nothing to do with me being interested in international politics. I only wanted to raise questions with my work. Questions like who are we? What is our history? How is our society? My main concern was to raise questions and get people to reflect, to inspire the intellectual world, the masses to think. It had nothing to do with politics." [105]

For many of the performances during the mid-1980s, artists wrapped themselves up. This was the case in *The Last Supper*, in *King and Queen*, and in Ding Yi's performance. At that time, China was only just beginning to move away from the obligatory Mao suit.

In other performances, the body was used as an instrument and subjected to extreme endurance, like in the 'M' Art Group's performances. Xu Bing's performances differed from the rest. He came up with totally new concepts from the very beginning of his career, often causing consternation. His early work was well thought out and highly innovative, inspired by both China's tradition and the Mao Zedong legacy.

In some he worked with animals while in others he involved other people in creating the artwork with him, such as the influential *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* and the controversial *A Case of Transference*, which he performed twice. For *A Case of Transference* he stamped two pigs with respectively Roman and Chinese characters and allowed them to mate. These two creatures, devoid of human consciousness, yet carrying the marks of human civilization on their bodies, engaged in the most primal form of 'social intercourse'. The absolute directness of this undertaking produced a result that was

both unthinkable and worth thinking about. In watching the behavior of the two pigs, we are led to reflect on human behavior.[106] Xu Bing explains: "I work with animals as a way of rethinking human culture, because they offer a vantage point from which to look at culture, as embodied by the dense expression of writing. As I was preparing *A Case Study of Transference* people were worried that the pigs wouldn't work. But the pigs really enjoyed it. They didn't care that they were in an art gallery, the arena of culture (…) It is the difference between civilization and nature. The pigs really enjoyed themselves, but the people felt embarrassed as they watched them. That point is really important."[107] In juxtaposing the Chinese writing system with a Western one and then presenting that juxtaposition via mating pigs raises many questions about East-West relations and interdependence.[108] (See front cover).

Working with animals not only raised questions on the relationship between human beings and nature, and the position of the human being in the natural order, but also on who is in control.

About his *Tsan Series*, Xu Bing says: "… organized in neat rows, the moths lay tiny eggs which compose the dot-like matrix of a 'text' across the page (…) They leave a trace, but a trace that continually erases itself. The inevitable natural cycle from life to death is in full evidence in the *Tsan Series*, where cocoons are littered about like death shrouds."[109]

For *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, Xu Bing made an ink rubbing of the Great Wall. The Great Wall was a popular location for performances in the 1980s. Built during various periods in Chinese history, it is heralded as one of the great symbols of China but also criticized because many workers lost their lives building it. It is simultaneously representative of protection and closing off from the outside world. Loaded with significance, it also provided layers of meaning to the work of Xu Bing, who amplified the ancient Chinese practice of ink block printing or stele rubbing to extreme dimensions. By engaging a large group of workers to create his artwork, Xu Bing's performance touched upon the

sensitivity of a national symbol, but as explained earlier, it can also be placed in the context of creating art with and for the masses as prescribed by Mao Zedong. *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* took several weeks to complete and resulted in a huge installation presenting a life-size print of the Great Wall. The three pictures below show the workers in action and the result of the rubbing.

Xu Bing and his crew working at the Great Wall in 1990 © Courtesy of Xu Bing

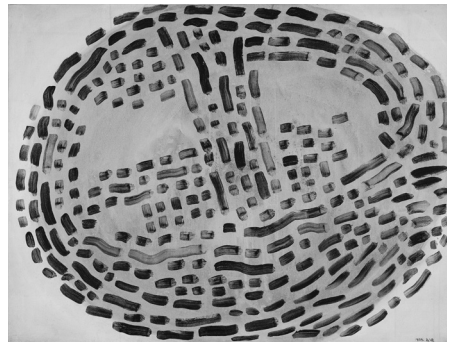
Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, 1990–1991, mixed media installation
© Courtesy of Xu Bing

Performance art challenged the authorities, and maybe even more so, questioned the human condition in China and the world in general. It also questioned the role and function of art. The provocative nature of some of these acts and the number of people involved reflects a deep social and ideological concern expressed in art. This may have been an expression of a rapidly changing society and an extreme rupture with the past, like a snake shedding off its skin to move into a new condition.

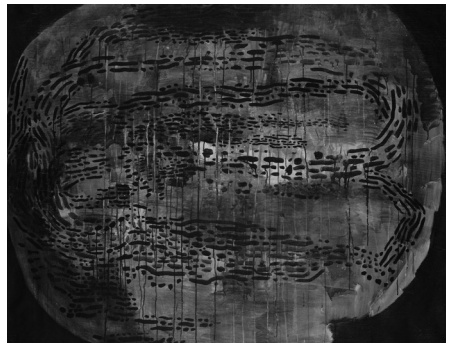
Innovation and experimentation was not limited to performance and installation art. Painters also began using new content and techniques, and abstract art was one of the techniques they employed. Li Shan and Yu Youhan were born in a transition period for China, before the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. They grew up during the Mao Zedong era, which had a deep influence on them. Yu Youhan is considered one of the pioneers in the evolution of Chinese contemporary art history, an artist of major influence in terms of innovation, and a central figure of the Shanghai Minimalist movement. Following Wu Guanzhong's widely discussed publication on the beauty of abstract art published in the early 1980s, various artists began to experiment with abstract art. Even if it coincided with the spirit of the time, this was a major step after the dominance of Socialist Realism, and especially because traditional Chinese ink painting had always kept a link with reality.

Both Li Shan and Yu Youhan have used a wide variety of styles during their career. Their abstract art certainly coincided with the experimental nature of the 1980s. Li Shan created black and white abstract images using basic forms and geometrical symbols like lines and circles. Yu Youhan's minimalist or abstract work experimented with Taoist concepts relating to the cosmos with cycles, expansion and interrelated movements. The pictures below show two abstract works by Yu Youhan from the 1980s. The strong movement of lines in both paintings creates a dynamic that pulls the eye of the spectator into their depths. As the artist explains later in this book, he wanted to create a contracting and expanding cosmos and depict the repeating circular movement

of the boundless and timeless universe, and by doing so, establishing a link to China's Taoist tradition.



Yu Youhan 1985-2
Acrylic on canvas



Yu Youhan 1986
Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 130cm

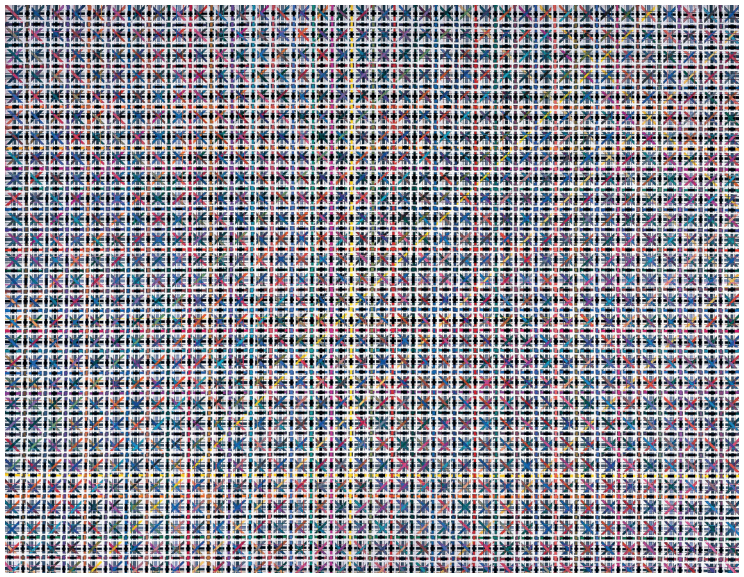
Yu Youhan was Ding Yi's teacher in art school. Ding Yi had a clear vision on what he wanted from the very beginning. "In 1981 my art career really started. I knew what I wanted to do. I did not like Russian art at all, so I studied French artists. Utrillo had a big influence on me, especially on my painting technique. And there was the exhibition in Shanghai of Shanghai artists who had left China in the 1930s. They had a major influence on my technique. What they did was very different from Russian art." [110] After an initial exploration period inspired by the works of Utrillo and the Shanghai artists Wu Guanzhong and Zhao Wuji who had left China decades earlier, Ding Yi made a radical decision. He wanted to make art stripped of all superfluous elements, and get as far away as possible from the traditional genre of painting and back to the very essence of art. He developed his own linguistic system using only x and + symbols and has remained loyal to that system throughout his career.

Ding Yi's paintings are often described as abstract. At the beginning of his career, he went as far as using rulers to create exact paintings. What Ding Yi wanted was 'to avoid personal expression' in his paintings.[111] He formulates his search for a new artistic

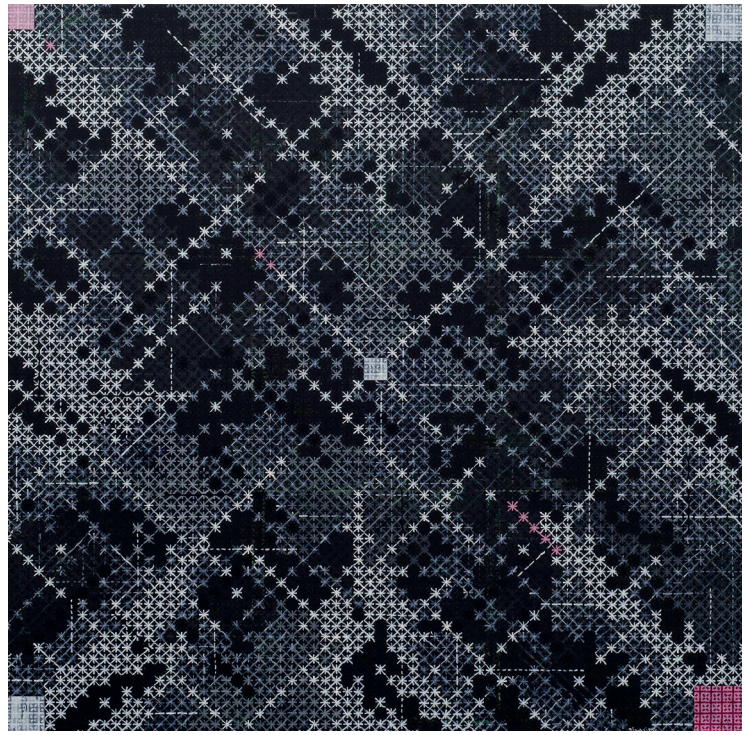
language as follows: “The possibility of breaking through was to make art in a manner that was not art-like, to sift away all skill, all narrative, all painterliness. That most familiar printer’s mark, the crosshair, became my symbol. People often ask me what it means. Actually, in my paintings, it has no meaning.” [112]

Ding Yi already participated in the early modern art exhibition *Modern Painting: six-person co-exhibition* in March 1985 at the Fudan University Students Club, Shanghai.

The two pictures below and opposite are representative of early and later works by Ding Yi. The work from 1991 reflects his search for the essence of art, using tools to create straight lines. The ‘black’ picture from 2012 shows the evolution in the artist’s work. While he has continued to use the x and + symbols, he has developed a freer style. The result is more dynamic, with greater depth and perspective than his earlier work.



Ding Yi, *Appearances of Crosses*, 1991–1993, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 180cm
© Courtesy of Din Yi and Shanghart Gallery



Ding Yi, *Appearances of Crosses*, 2012-8, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 200cm
© Courtesy of Ding Yi and ShanghArt Gallery

Song Haidong is not only considered one of the first performance artists in China but also one of the earliest installation artists. For his installation *The Earth in the Eye of Extraterrestrial*, Song Haidong tied part of a model brick wall to a terrestrial globe (with China at its center) that is turned towards the spectator. Presented alongside is a frame with pictures referring to various problem situations in the world. In this installation, Song Haidong questioned China’s position in the world and international politics.

The English words on the brick wall were copied from graffiti on the Berlin Wall. As well as a photograph of the Berlin Wall, a photograph of the Thirty-Eighth Parallel, the line that separates South Korea from North Korea, appeared in the picture frame.

Zhang Peili was also one of the most influential and innovative artists of the 1980s. Initially he applied new content and styles in his painting. He had strong ideas on what art should mean and the role it should play. In 1988, Zhang Peili created the video work *30x30*. For the entire length of the videotape (180 minutes) he continuously broke a mirror and glued it back together again. With this work he is considered the first Chinese video artist. From 1995, Zhang Peili gave up painting, and engaged fully in video art and multi-media art.

Zhang Peili, *30x30*, 1988, video

Liu Wei, Wang Ziwei, Fang Lijun and Feng Mengbo's talents were recognized at an early stage but they were too young to take part in the artistic developments of the mid-1980s and as such they are not pioneers of the first hour. By the time they came onto the art scene, the general climate was already liberalized; therefore their innovativeness was not so connected with a break from politics. Nevertheless, they were influential.

Feng Mengbo wanted to break free from the constraints of linear narrative when he was still at art school: "I truly believe I was an innovative student, progressing towards the purest form of print-making (...) Paper had occupied me for a whole year but I was running out of space. After some thought, painting seemed like a good idea." [113] Videogames are the subject of Feng Mengbo's early paintings. He eventually turned to

multimedia and is considered to be the first Chinese multimedia artist. When choosing multimedia, Feng Mengbo did not consider what he did as creating art: "I realized that this was pop culture. It was all about playing with things, making wacky combinations and discovering new and funny meanings in associations. But, from the first videogame painting, my goal was to one day produce a game with Nintendo or Sega (...) When I began with a computer it really wasn't about making art. I didn't consider myself as groundbreaking. But as time passed, the creative power it was drawing out of me was just as artistic as anything I had ever done with conventional media." [114] In time, Feng Mengbo's view on multimedia art changed, so he never commercialized any of his games: "I still consider them as art. I believe art is inspired by games, consequently a game is art." [115]

In the post-New Wave period, Feng Mengbo's work was sometimes labeled as Political Pop because he used material from the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong. However, the artist disagrees with this label.[116] He prefers to be known for his multimedia art. "The first thing I do when I wake up every morning is to sit in this chair and switch on all the equipment. When the screen lights up, the day begins." [117]

It took a while before Fang Lijun found his own artistic language. In 1984, his pencil drawings played with light and dark and in 1988 turned to 'exaggerated chiaroscuro'. He explains: "Once I had grasped the techniques of painting, I lost my direction for a while. Aestheticism, idealism, and formalism – my interest in all these was waning. Even though they were so attractive to many other artists, as far as I was concerned they were becoming increasingly insipid. In 1988, I worked on a series of drawings, still lost in my direction." [118] Later Fang Lijun began to produce colorful oil paintings and woodcuts.

The myriad of new artistic directions explored by these artists reflects the atmosphere in China at the time it opened up, when quite suddenly everything seemed possible and experimentation was the norm. The sudden liberalization and accompanying uncertainty provided fertile ground for this outburst of creativity.

3.5 The Mao Zedong legacy

Mao Zedong and his legacy are deep-rooted in artists who grew up during the People's Republic of China. Some, like Xu Bing and Wang Guangyi, explicitly refer to formerly imposed standards and continue to refer to the concept of 'art for the masses'. Xu Bing literally uses Mao's texts in his artwork, while in the work of Wang Guangyi we often recognize the formal standards of Socialist Realism.

But the symbols and icons of the Maoist era have also become a rich source of inspiration from which to draw for many artists. Political Pop, with its extensive use of Mao Zedong imagery, mainly occurred in the period of *Mao Fever (Maore)* at the beginning of the 1990s. Even today, artists continue to refer to the Maoist period in their work. Mao's standards for the function and role of art still have impact, on the work of individual artists and also at institutional level. The influence of Mao has an external and internal dimension. The use of symbols and icons is easy to recognize, but the deeper impact of Maoism on the generation that grew up under his rule is more difficult to grasp.

Artists explicitly or implicitly refer to Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Some use the image of Mao Zedong and other party leaders in a sarcastic way; others distort Cultural Revolution icons. For a number of artists, revolutionary icons were the only images they saw during childhood, and revolutionary propaganda fed the stories they were raised with.

The various ways in which Mao Zedong's image is used are certainly not only in terms of opposition. The examples below show the ambiguous attitude of artists towards Mao and the complexity of their relationship with him and the legacy of Socialist Realism.

As a child, Feng Mengbo loved the revolutionary symbols he grew up with, like the red star. He claims: "The only truly iconic image in Chinese portraiture is that of Mao Zedong." [119] But he also loved Peking Opera, which he explores in his work.

Feng Mengbo, *TMDBS 01, Taking Mount Doom by Strategy*, 1997, interactive installation, 3 Macs, 3 projectors, audio system
© Courtesy of Feng Mengbo and ShanghArt Gallery

This picture of Feng Mengbo's work shows Peking Opera actor Yang Zirong in action. While numerous classical Peking Operas exist, during the Cultural Revolution Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing, selected eight operas to educate the people in the spirit of the revolution. *Taking Mount Tiger by Strategy* was one of them. Feng Mengbo satirizes this opera in his work *Taking Mount Doom by Strategy*.

As a child, Feng Mengbo enjoyed going to these revolutionary operas and Yang Zirong was his role model, possessing all the qualities he thought represented virtue in a person.[120]

Feng Mengbo remembers returning to painting after a visit to Berlin in 1997 with Harald Szeeman and Holly Solomon where he saw Andy Warhol's portrait of Mao Zedong: "Andy Warhol definitely didn't have an official permit. When my obsession with computer art began in 1993, I gradually came to neglect painting altogether; yet every time I visited an art museum, it was always the paintings and sculpture that most attracted me. (…) I took my whole family to Italy for a three-week holiday. What a wonderful time

I had viewing so many great works of classical art – I felt drunk with beauty. The glowing, pulsating images of the silver screen may easily draw the eye and captivate the attention, but in the end the powerful, rock-like stillness of classical art is so much more electrifying. And so I began to paint again. To me the only truly iconic image in Chinese portraiture is that of Mao Zedong; and my return to 'classical' painting began from there." [121]

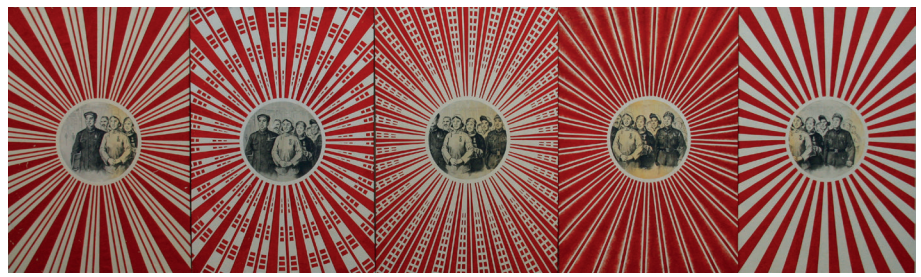
Li Shan uses Mao Zedong's image and icons from Cultural Revolution propaganda posters. Raised under the banner of Mao Zedong from the moment he was born, he acknowledges that the use of these symbols stems from the deep impact Mao had on him. He mainly uses two popular Mao portraits: Mao as a guerilla in the 1930s and the portrait of an aging, benevolent looking patriarch that hung on Tiananmen Gate during the Cultural Revolution. In the artist's memory, they are associated with a specific range of emotional experiences and are therefore closely connected to a specific time and place in his life.[122] Mao Zedong appears in Li Shan's *Rouge Series*, for example, with a flower in his mouth. In other paintings, the image of Mao Zedong merges with or is part of his personae.

Zhang Peili uses slogans and readymade propaganda images from the Cultural Revolution in his work in a repetitive way to distort the original meaning. He uses propaganda films from 1950s and '60s and combines the patriotic discourse of communist heroes with Chinese military marching music.[123] Propaganda movies are very familiar to anyone who lived under Mao. By selecting melodramatic sequences and showing them in a repetitive way, the artist renders these images absurd.

The power of revolutionary images can be recognized in the colossal paintings and prints of Fang Lijun in which thousands of heads are looking up, some idiotic, some numb, some helpless, etcetera.[124] Fang Lijun is not explicit about his intention. These masses gazing upwards are reminiscent of the mass meetings of the Cultural Revolution, but interpretation is left open to the viewer.

Fang Lijun, *2003.2.1*, 2003, woodcut print, 400 x 852cm
© Courtesy of Fang Lijun

Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution as cultural memories are present in Geng Jianyi's series *Eternal Rays of the Sun* in which he replaces the image of Mao Zedong by other popular symbols representing China, such as the panda and even Chinese money. In *Eternal Rays of the Sun* pictured below, he replaces Mao's image with a group of people. While Mao's image always had a very steady position, firm as a rock, the people Geng Jianyi depicts seem to be moving within the center circle, going from one direction to another. The center of the sun's rays is no longer a static imposing image of Mao Zedong but a moving crowd. Mao Zedong is no longer at the center, he has moved into history.



Geng Jianyi, *Eternal Rays of the Sun*, 1992, oil on canvas, 196 x 130cm x 5 pieces
© Courtesy of Geng Jianyi and ShanghArt Gallery

In other work, Geng Jianyi refers to Cultural Revolution slogans, propaganda posters and songs like ‘Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman’ (see text on ‘Avant-Garde Cup’ Grand Prix page 221).[125] He not only depicts Mao Zedong, but also Lenin, symbols of the Communist Party and the red star.

References to Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution in Liu Wei’s work exists in his use of Mao and other party leaders like Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng, in juxtaposition or combination with his own father and family members.[126] By depicting people in a distorted way, his work reveals cynicism.

Although Mao Zedong is mainly a childhood memory for Wang Ziwei, he started making Mao paintings as early as 1987.[127] He depicted Mao Zedong in a lighthearted manner.[128] He appears as a god-like image overlooking scenes reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein.[129] Wang Ziwei elaborates: “I prefer reading books by Mao Zedong to philosophy books. Sometimes, cultural issues become too complicated. Images of red flags seem very warm. Mao cared for the masses and communicated with them. This is quite a Pop attitude.” [130] Although Wang Ziwei often depicts Mao in a derisive way, this statement betrays his positive attitude towards him.

Xu Bing often seems to refer to the utopian ideals of Mao Zedong and the Communist Party in their standards to which art and literature in a socialist society had to conform. He continues to use Mao Zedong’s idea of art for the masses. He often creates artwork in cooperation with farmers and workers, such as *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* and *A Study of Transference*.

Xu Bing is aware of the fact that his work troubles intellectuals: “These works develop from a certain doubt about cultural authority. For this reason, my work troubles intellectuals. Many of those who saw *A Book from the Sky* in China wanted to find real words, but they couldn’t, and that bothered them.” [131] He believes in Mao’s idea that art should serve the people. In his work, he uses Mao’s dictums such as ‘Art for

the people’ or writes ‘Chairman Mao said/Calligraphy by Xu Bing’. He asserts that transcripts of Mao’s speeches at Yan’an are crucial to his thinking in some works. They are not used in an ironical fashion, but as an integral part of what his artwork wants to communicate.

Xu Bing repeatedly refers to the importance of Mao Zedong’s ideas about art: “The introduction to *New English Calligraphy* has been shown in different countries around the world and a lot of teachers have brought their students to the gallery to learn. Some have even asked where they can buy the instruction book for their students. They are trying to find new ways to teach younger generations about other cultures. During the Gwangju Biennale, the program was made available on a local television channel. Interestingly, some visitors later wrote to me in my invented characters, which they had learned. I believe that art should serve the people. That was Mao’s idea. Contemporary artists can learn something from Mao. I once made a work in which, if the text is read from left to right in the way it appears it doesn’t make sense. If, on the other hand, you read it from top to bottom, right to left, then the characters link together and make sense. This text is from Mao’s ‘Talks on Art and Literature’. If you read it horizontally, you can’t get the exact meaning, but you still have the sense that it is Mao talking.” [132] Xu Bing also explicitly refers to Mao’s ideas in his installation *Art for the People Banner (qizhi jihua: yishu wei renmin fuwu)*, shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1999.[133]

It is clear that Mao Zedong made a deep impression on Xu Bing: “In addition to its heritage from the past, Chinese culture includes certain components derived from the Mao era (…) what we obtain from the education system is an output of the Maoist transformation of our cultural traditions (…) For contemporary Chinese artists (…) part of their experience is the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, upon which lies the uniqueness of Chinese contemporary art.”[134]

Yu Youhan, *A Human Being Intrinsically Dies*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 110cm
© Courtesy of Yu Youhan

Yu Youhan has always maintained that Mao Zedong deeply influenced him and that art should be created for the Chinese people as a reflection of their lives. He uses the image of Mao Zedong and other leaders such as Deng Xiaoping along with icons of the Cultural Revolution in a variety of ways. He calls "Maoist art 'pleasant to hear and look at' (*xi wen le jian*)" [135] He explains: "I like to express my thoughts through images of Mao Zedong. I have also painted other subjects, such as the Chinese currency, the Renminbi; bicycles; playing cards and abstract works, like the *Circle* series. The reason I have chosen Mao as a favorite subject is because he is a popular character, both among Chinese and Westerners. I myself consider him a legendary figure worth depicting. During the Cultural Revolution, portraits of Mao were deified: they exuded

a feeling of political passion and cultureless superstition. Mao advocated getting rid of the 'Four Old Principles'. He opposed the use of the dragon and phoenix pattern, which to him was symbolic of the blind worship of monarchy (...) my goal is to depict the figure of Mao in a new light." [136] Some of his Mao paintings contain implicit criticism, like the one shown above, in which he depicts Mao Zedong after death. Propaganda pictures depicting the historical moment of Mao's death usually show the deep grief of the Chinese people. Yu Youhan seems to have a different view on the occasion. The people surrounding the dead Mao are not crying; they seem to be very happy. They all smile and dance and the world is full of colors. The message of this painting coincides with Fang Lijun's memory of seeing a smile on his grandfather's face when he heard Mao had died.

Wang Guangyi explicitly states that he wants to create works that pass on the Maoist cultural legacy to younger generations.

Wang Guangyi's *East Wind-Golden Dragon* is a reproduction of Mao Zedong's 'East Wind', the first domestically produced automobile in China in which Mao drove in 1958. Wang Guangyi's installation features a photograph of Mao inspecting the car.

Wang Guangyi, *East Wind-Golden Dragon*, 2006–2007, mixed media installation: cast iron, fiberglass, photograph, etc., 500 x 190 x 165cm © Courtesy of Wang Guangyi

Wang Guangyi's artistic language often expresses the heroism of Maoist times. Mao Zedong occupies an important position in his work, both in his paintings and his installations. Wang Guangyi confirms the importance of socialist cultural memory: "I felt a strong urge to return to the basic forms of socialist expression. The process of creating the sculptures in fact gradually helped me to formulate a conceptual framework for my work, that is, a visual concept of socialism. This idea had been in my mind for some time, but it was not until I created the sculptures that I was really able to articulate it. This was a watershed for me. In my sculptures I attempt to return to the simplest, purest state of fundamental faith. From the standpoint of present society, I am not trying to criticize anything; rather, I hope to create signifiers of cultural memory for future generations. Conceptually speaking, this process of returning to the original expression has meant for me a return to the original ideological worldview that guided my earliest educational experience, and by extension, to the earliest views on the questions of form that were imparted to me."[137] This statement confirms Wang Guangyi's position vis-à-vis the ideology and standards of Socialist Realism to which he somehow continues to adhere, enabling him to pass on Maoist socialist cultural heritage. Wang Guangyi is a fine example of an artist who, in spite of breaking away from political control in the 1980s, continues to refer to the Maoist legacy and respect it.

3.6 Art and politics: An ongoing negotiation

Contemporary Chinese art has long been accepted by the government and is now strongly supported, but still within the framework of the post-socialist context. Being an artist in a one-party state demands continuous negotiation with changing standards and policies. During Maoist times, there was total government control. Today the climate is more liberated, but control continues to exist. This 'control' is not an external control imposed onto an art world that is disconnected from it, but more an interaction between different players in the field of art, one that Chinese artists know how to

navigate. This field is in constant flux between innovation and representation of what central government wants for China, and how art can fit into this and play an active supporting role. In practice this means that artists, curators, gallery owners, etc., maintain a relationship with government and policy makers.

Artists inside China are never disconnected from the overall art scene; they take a position within it. Some of them work in official institutions including ministries, and hold key positions in the art world such as heads of museums or governmental representatives communicating with the global art scene. Many of these positions are held by practicing and internationally renowned Chinese artists. As well as their own work, these artists are also concerned with artistic development and policy in China. Other artists choose a position of dissidence.

The testimonies below describe the totalitarian context during Mao's reign and the liberalization after opening up.

Li Shan describes the indoctrination of his youth: "My generation is deeply influenced by Mao Zedong. From the moment we went to school, from primary school all through secondary school – we grew up underneath the banner of Mao Zedong – the symbols I use are all symbols of that time. That is our history. When I was in primary school Mao Zedong's image was above the blackboard. During the Cultural Revolution, when I entered Tiananmen Square – Mao Zedong had eight encounters with the Red Guards – I could see Mao Zedong was real. It was the same person as in the pictures surrounding me when I was a child."[138] Ironically, despite having a peasant background, as an artist Li Shan was sent to the countryside along with others from different class backgrounds for being an intellectual. He endured almost two years of physical labor and communist studies in Zhejiang Province learning from farmers. This reflects the complex and even absurd situation at the time when intellectuals were forced to connect with farmers and workers to learn from the masses and so remain close to them in their artwork.

Xu Bing's relationship with the government and official policy is exemplary of the complexity existing between art and politics in China. It reveals the ambiguity of searching for artistic freedom and at the same time, negotiating and engaging with official policy. The fact that Chinese society is largely built on meritocracy and that successful people and artists are role models for others, adds to this complexity and to the tension between the center and margins. Xu Bing's case shows that it is not as simple as being in or out. It also shows how different historical conditions and policies in recent decades have resulted in totally different positions for him as an artist.

Xu Bing grew up in Peking University, an environment closely controlled by the government. His parents were criticized during the Cultural Revolution and he was sent to the countryside. Doing his best to be a worthy 'socialist' citizen as he formulates it, Xu Bing succeeded in gaining respect. But when almost ten years after the opening up he exhibited one of his first artworks, *Book from the Sky*, which had taken years to create, he was harshly criticized by the Ministry of Culture for his so-called oppositional nature. In an article in *Wenyi Bao* the spokesperson of the Ministry of Culture stated: "... I have always felt that when people do something they must have a clear goal, for themselves, for others, for the people, for all mankind – to have no purpose at all is absurd and dissolute. If I am asked to evaluate *A Book from the Sky*, I can only say that it gathers together the formalistic, abstract, subjective, irrational, anti-art, anti-traditional (...) qualities of the New Wave of Fine Arts, and pushes the Chinese New Wave towards a ridiculous impasse. I am reminded of a Chinese idiom, 'ghosts pounding the wall'. In the past a traveler was walking in the midst of a dark night. When he lost his sense of direction and lost all reference points upon which he could rely to judge where he was, he spent the rest of the night walking in circles in the same spot. It was as if a ghost had built an invisible wall, making it impossible for [the traveler] to leave its confines. Can't we say that [*A Book from the Sky*] as well as the above-mentioned 'non-expressive art' is the phenomenon of 'ghosts pounding the wall' in human thinking, activity, and artistic creativity? Even though the above introduction to the creative production of the

Chinese New Wave of fine arts is certainly far from comprehensive, still, in sketchy description brings to me a deep understanding that the essence of the Chinese New Wave is to oppose the laws of art and to oppose society." [139]

Wu Hung associates the term 'ghost' used in the context of *Gui da qiang* with the Cultural Revolution, when similar terms were used.[140] 'Ghost' was a common label for 'counter-Revolutionaries'. Once declared 'ox-ghost and snake-demon' (*niu gui she shen*), a person became an outcast from the 'bright confident people', his identity as a political alien and a creature of darkness became public knowledge. Xu Bing reacted subtly to the official criticism in *Wenyi Bao* when he used *Ghosts pounding the Wall/Gui da qiang* as the title of his life-size rubbing of the Great Wall.

Xu Bing's *A Case Study of Transference* also drew unfavorable attention to the Han Mo Arts Center, which sponsored this clandestine event. In spite of all the criticism he received in the past, today Xu Bing is a highly respected artist both inside and outside China. He is also Vice-President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, a position close to the Chinese government. Xu Bing is a prime example of how artists deal with shifting conditions and find their place.

Zhang Peili's relationship with politics and government control is equally complex. He expresses his ideas on state interference in art as follows: "In 1985 we really reacted against government control. This is a big problem in China. I don't think art should be controlled, not by any government and not by anything else." [141]

In spite of this statement and his awareness that art is controlled in China, Zhang Peili actively participates in the institutional art world. In 2001, he established a multimedia department at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, which he headed until 2010. He is currently the director of OCT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shanghai. Zhang Peili is known for his dissenting voice, and yet he still knows how to negotiate his position as an artist and as a decision and policy maker.

Zhang Peili's work not only explicitly questions state control of art; it questions the human condition in a state controlled society. "All sorts of wonderful reasons were used to confine people's thinking from childhood. I hope to reveal such a compulsory condition of human life."[142] Many of his works investigate power relations.

Zhang Peili, *Hygiene Document No. 3*, 1991, video
© Courtesy of Zhang Peili

In the video *Hygiene Document No. 3 (Wei Zi 3 Hao)* Zhang Peili washes a chicken. This act relates back to memories of his youth. The video records the artist washing a chicken for 150 minutes until the tape runs out. The water, foam and the chicken, which willingly submits without protest, can be read as connotations of brainwashing or the chicken symbolizing the borders of China. The work can also be seen as a simulation of the ritual in political education and entertainment as coercive persuasion, both going against individual thinking. The willingness of the chicken undergoing the washing can be read as unquestioning compliance to those in power.

In the video *Last Words*, Zhang Peili uses sequences from propaganda movies from the Cultural Revolution. The repetition of these melodramatic sequences renders them absurd.

Zhang Peili likes to refer to the impact of television in China, and specifically to the construction of television images that represent official ideological propaganda addressed to the masses, which are collectively subjugated to the centralist discourse of the socialist government.

In the video *Water: Standard Pronunciation* he stages a popular CCTV newscaster who reads the entry about 'water' from a dictionary. The text she reads is meaningless, making her actions and reading totally obsolete. This work is widely viewed as a critique of the official news media in China and of how the nation's broadcasters talk endlessly without delivering any deep messages.

Zhang Peili's paintings and installations are considered critical of the social, political and authoritarian environment in China. Nevertheless, rather than explicitly referring to politics in his work, he likes to push absurdity to extremes. The artist is open to interpretation of his work, claiming he is not sure exactly what it is he wants to express. He challenges the spectator to reflect on what is happening in front of their eyes.

Zhang Peili, *Water – Cihai Standard Pronunciation*, 1991, video
© Courtesy of Zhang Peili

Another example of using and interacting with socialist tradition is the work of Wang Guangyi. He explicitly and deliberately draws upon Socialist Realism. Wang Guangyi confirms his special relationship with Mao Zedong, stating that the difference between himself and Warhol is that "Warhol did not know Mao. For Warhol, Mao was just an icon". For Wang Guangyi, Mao imprinted many emotions on every Chinese soul and not all of them negative. "Even ten years after his death, the imprint is still there." [143]

Wang Guangyi continues to use icons of the Cultural Revolution's propaganda machine and the artistic language of Socialist Realism in his work, beginning with the *Great Criticism Series* and later in the *Materialist Series*. He elaborates on what this means for him as someone who grew up under Mao: "The word 'materialist' has rich connotations in China; it is a term that contains a 'revolutionary' meaning. Even as a child, I learnt that 'materialism/*weiwu zhuyi*' and 'idealism/*weixin zhuyi*' express the most fundamental polarities: we identify ourselves as 'materialists' because it is a position that signifies the 'revolutionary', and it is a force opposed to 'idealism'. The works of the *Materialist Series* are both similar and dissimilar to the works of the *Great Criticism Series*. Here the element of contradiction is missing: they remain icons in themselves. I want to refer back to a spirit of socialism; that is to say, I don't want to portray one side of a binary polarity but rather to capture the purity – and complexities – of a socialist visual experience. What I want to express is the power within the icons themselves." [144]

He not only refers to politics in his artistic language, but also in the content of his work. For example, his installation *The History of a Newspaper* refers to the *Beijing qingnian bao*. This work shows how the publication of a newspaper follows fluctuations in the political and economic climate. Wang Guangyi elaborates on the installation: "*The History of a Newspaper* refers to the *Beijing Youth Post/Beijing qingnian bao* newspaper, which was founded in 1949, the same year as the People's Republic of China. Since then, it has tracked the changes in Chinese politics: sometimes it had to

stop publishing; other times it was up and running again. The history of this newspaper – from its founding, through periods of being shut down, and then resuming publication – is a reflection of Chinese political history during this significant period. *Beijing Youth Post* was published from 1949 to 1951, and then from 1952 to 1954 when it ceased publication. If one is familiar with Chinese history, one knows the political and economic situation in China during those later three years: China's economy was in dire straits, the political scene was extremely unstable, and there were problems with the structure of authority. This was an official newspaper, and so these problems were immediately reflected in its situation. Then in the early 1960s, major reforms on the political front took place, and the newspaper began publishing again. The economy started to recover, but at the same time there were severe restrictions on freedom of speech; and then the newspaper was shut down again. Someone who understands China's past immediately recognizes the significance of the blanks in the newspaper's history. Art, sociology and political history are blended together in this single product." [145] These fluctuations in the publication of the newspaper offer insights into how artists have to negotiate and renegotiate what they do and what position they take in the Chinese context. We can detect the ambiguity of Wang Guangyi towards the official climate, actively using what has been imposed and what he has been indoctrinated with, while at the same time criticizing political dominance.

Geng Jianyi's paintings of grinning faces called the *Second State* and *Double Happiness* immediately established his name at the beginning of his career. But he is best known for questioning and investigating politics and bureaucracy and their influence on artistic creation and on human lives. Geng Jianyi explains: "Of course the government has an influence on me. Since the moment I was born until today it has an influence. Only it is very difficult for me to pin down exactly what that influence is. Everything is always under control in China." [146] He is aware of the 'self' in today's world and the collective memory in a socialist state and an authoritarian regime. Geng Jianyi's work deals with self-criticism, contracts, collective ownership, freedom of expression, and the distinction

between public and private. At stake in Geng Jianyi's work are individual identity and his personal position within the context of the collective state. His artworks refer to the general political condition of Chinese society rather than to specific political events.

Geng Jianyi focuses on the individual and he has created several series in various artistic languages in which the face of the individual is erased. The photograph below is one example. We only recognize part of the face. The rest is obliterated, wiped out, removed. The artist seems to suggest that the individual is only allowed to show part of his true identity.

Geng Jianyi, *Face Made By Liquids*, 2000, chemigram, 50 x 30cm

Not all artists negotiate their position with equal intensity. Fang Lijun suffered during the Cultural Revolution and the crackdown on the protests of June 1989 brought back childhood memories and hit him hard. He tries to stay away from explicit political standpoints or interference. He has adopted a cynical attitude both in his work and in his view towards life. This becomes apparent in many of his statements: "Only a stupid bastard would allow himself to be cheated time and time again. We would rather be called hopeless, dangerous, rogues and confused than be cheated again. Don't try any of your old tricks on us, for all dogma will be thoroughly questioned, negated and thrown into the rubbish bin."[147]

Sun Liang closes himself off from the world in his artwork. "When isolated from the bustling world, I will have a broader world."[148] Likewise, politics has little influence on the work of Ding Yi: "I am free from outside pressure. There is no interference from the outside."[149] For these artists, government interference in present times is limited to their position as an artist and citizen partaking in Chinese society in general.

3.7 Top-down discourse past and present

During the Maoist era (and throughout Chinese history) the central top-down discourse has interacted with bottom-up dynamics. To explore the position of artists in the contemporary post-socialist Chinese context, we must look into the tension between the two. The position of individual artists as discussed earlier reflects a variety of negotiation strategies vis-à-vis the general climate and government-imposed political and economic policies. Their situations, standpoints and artworks also reflect and coincide with these fluctuations over time.

Some artists like Xu Bing, Zhang Peili, and Wang Guangyi are very successful in maneuvering and navigating their position in a constantly fluctuating climate. Others, like Fang Lijun, Ding Yi or Sun Liang take a distance from politics and society and engage in individual activities. In their statements and artworks, artists

take different positions ranging from preserving and commenting to questioning and mocking.

A centralist one-party state can probably only exist if there is a strong centralized message that the population is willing to believe, be part of and participate in. On an ideological level, the Chinese government's concern is keeping the dominant discourse in place, keeping China unified and promoting a common Chinese culture. This implies rules and standards, and also censorship and propaganda.

In Maoist times, all artists belonged to the Artists Association and followed ideological sessions. After the opening up, artists had much more freedom. Generally speaking, everything seems possible these days, but boundaries still exist. Establishing and maintaining the dominant discourse is done by actively promoting certain concepts like 'Five thousand years of Chinese history' and 'The Chinese Dream' and the obliteration of unwanted discourses is achieved by limiting access. Waves of liberalization and repression follow changes in government policy. We can recognize these waves in recent Chinese art history as described in Chapter 2. But we can easily find contemporary examples as well, such as the closing down of the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2014,[150] and in the artist's statements throughout this book.

Communism did not introduce the idea of a dominant central ideology and a dominant discourse that needs to be maintained. Since the establishment of the Chinese Empire in 221 BC, a strong center with a centralized administration and a counter-current or periphery has existed. Ink painting and calligraphy belonged to the curriculum in the Confucian education system. To be an artist implied studying the official curriculum for a government position. Not all those who studied art ended up in the administration. Many artists retreated from public life. Maintaining a dominant culture also implied censorship and self-censorship. Throughout the ages Chinese artists have explored the borders and limits, have innovated and experimented. There has always been a tension and dynamic between what is officially imposed and artistic freedom.

The fact that the central government outlines the broad framework for the art world does not imply that all Chinese art is political. On the contrary, individual artists have artistic freedom. Artists succeed in negotiating their individual position within this framework, sometimes dancing on the line between the margins and the center, but still doing what they want to do. The paths some artists such as Xu Bing or Zhang Peili have taken in the course of their career, moving from the margins to the center in a seemingly fluid way, testing the borders and finding equilibrium, illustrate this.

The central government in China has a tendency to incorporate what arises from the margins into the official mainstream when the time is deemed ripe. Such a system offers the freedom to experiment in the margins, and then at a certain point, these experiments move from being forbidden to being accepted. This happened, for instance, with the Stars who began by hanging their work outside the museum because they were not allowed inside, but almost immediately afterwards they obtained a place inside the official institutions, because the time was right and reform-minded people inside played a crucial supporting role.

Although the government was reluctant to support contemporary Chinese art for many years, the opening of art zones like 798 was a sign that things were changing. Another symbolic step for contemporary art in China was taken on October 1, 2012, China's National Day commemorating the establishment of the People's Republic of China, when the government opened two new museums in Shanghai. One was the *Power Station of Art*, designed for contemporary art (*Shanghai dangdai yishu bowuguan*). The other was the *China Art Museum (Zhonghua yishu guan)* in the former Chinese national pavilion of the Shanghai Expo 2010, designed to exhibit Chinese domestic art of the 20th century.

It is interesting to investigate the way both these museums present their collections and exhibitions, because they exemplify the complexity of the Chinese art world and confirm the complex nature of artists' negotiations as described above.

The *China Art Museum* shows original works by great masters of the 20th century in China, such as Liu Haisu, Wu Guanzhong, and Chen Yifei. It is fantastic to see these masters finally receive the visibility they deserve. However, at the same time the museum is also a prime example of government control and propaganda. As soon as you enter, propaganda hits you in the face: the glory of the Chinese Communist Party is presented in a number of huge heroic oil paintings reminiscent of the Socialist Realism tradition. These paintings were created in recent years to serve a particular purpose: they help to build the centralist nation and they educate the people in the dominant discourse. Throughout the museum you find educational paintings that have been specifically commissioned to establish a certain rhetoric and propaganda. Apart from their aesthetic value, these artworks are comparable to Mao posters of earlier times.

One of the museum rooms is devoted to minority art. The paintings *Taklimakan* (2009) depicting Uygur people and *Guluo's Child* (2009) depicting a Tibetan family, support the dominant rhetoric of China as a unified nation including its border areas in all their diversity. It is clear that the museum's set up is not only about art, but also about politics. This kind of museum questions the idea of artistic freedom and freedom in art. It combines artistic creativity and art manipulated to serve a political idea.

Nevertheless, by setting up these kinds of huge museums the government provides strong support for contemporary Chinese art, and this is reflected in the important position it has in China today.

This brings us to the position of the curator. Curatorship inside China after the opening up evolved in interaction with the global art scene, but also disconnected from it, especially in the first decades. While in the West curatorial practices since the 1960s have slowly but surely moved towards a curator-centered discourse, the Chinese art scene first had to liberate itself from the controlling hand of government.

In Maoist times, making exhibitions was mainly a rigid process of scrutinizing conformity with official standards. The goal of an exhibition was always to be educational and ideologically correct. Curatorship was purely about conformity to the imposed standards and glorification of the Communist Party. From the story of the Stars, we have learned about the tensions at that time and the spirit of breaking free from restrictions. We have also learned from the stories of the artists above that even in the most restrictive periods, artists sought alternative ways to show their work underground: in books, in private apartments or in garages. Stories about exhibitions being closed down are an integral part of China's art scene.

The situation has changed tremendously, but when investigating the context of an exhibition in 2013, we find proof that art is still not free from politics in post-social China. Interestingly, the position of curators is similar to that of individual artists, and demands the same flexibility and negotiation. A curator selects artwork based on a concept he wants to develop, but in an official museum like the *Power Station of Art* in Shanghai, aesthetics and art history meet politics.

Take for example the set up of the exhibition *Portrait of the Times. 30 years of Chinese contemporary art*, which opened in 2013. The exhibition showed more than 300 works by 117 artists, many of them world famous. Some of these artists were once considered highly controversial and even forbidden in China. Now the time was considered right to show their work in an official exhibition. The result was impressive, massive, exciting, astonishing, endless and beautiful. Nevertheless, when walking through the exhibition as a spectator, the hand of the government became more and more apparent. The educational aspect was there: all the texts described how great China is, and how these portraits represented China in all its diversity. The texts were written as if all Chinese artists have but one goal and that is to present and represent China as a nation. The underlying discourse was not only visible in the texts, but also in the choice of works. The

exhibition seemed to recount China's recent history and implicitly the road towards China's modernity.

The promise of '30 years contemporary Chinese art' was not fully kept. Most of the works were fairly recent and only a few dated back to the 1970s or 1980s. This exhibition showed China's socialist history through the lens of art, rather than 30 years of art history. As such, it was more to do with the history of a people, a society, a nation. The catalog confirms this. Apart from a statement by curator Li Xu, the other essays are about literature, photography and film. When describing the changes in China after opening up in 1978, Li Xu's rhetoric is reminiscent of Mao Zedong's on the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949: "The value and dignity of the individual were once again awakened and affirmed."[151] Li Xu hopes that an exhibition like this will provoke discussions within the fields of 'philosophy, history, political science, sociology, and psychology'. Art is not mentioned.

At the same time this exhibition provided a platform for Chinese artists to present their work to a large group of people. This recognized the importance of what they do as artists and was an impressive effort to 'connect artists with the masses'. Essays in the catalog reflect all the critical voices of the past 30 years, including Zhang Yuan's very controversial *Beijing Bastards*, a film that was explicitly forbidden and *Frozen*, a film made by Wang Xiaoshuai under the pseudonym Wu Ming (literally: No Name). Even the events of 1989 are explicitly mentioned. All this means that China is ready to deal with the realities of its recent history. But art remains a means to serve a political end.

Li Xu, curator of the exhibition is a negotiating curator. While he can be truly proud of what he realized, the exhibition shifted the focus from art to politics.

The *Power Station of Art* also hosts the Shanghai Biennale. Obviously the conditions are different when international exhibitions are organized. Contemporary art can only

blossom in China if there is an international dimension and the official institutions are well aware of this.

3.8 Bottom-up dynamics

Next to negotiating curatorship in the official arena, independent curatorship also exists, in places like the *Power Station of Art* when international exhibitions are on, and in alternative spaces such as private galleries or industry-funded museums or projects.

Independent curatorship came into being in 1989 with the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. This was a major step for contemporary Chinese art and somehow also the beginning of its internationalization. In the decades that followed, not only Chinese artists but also Chinese curators such as Hou Hanru and Fei Dawei and many others have become internationally known. China has independent curator-centered curatorship comparable to the international art scene. In the West, a number of curators and critics have established their names through the impact they've had on the art scene in general. We also see this happening in China amongst curators active on the international art scene, for example, Hou Hanru, Huang Zhuan, Gao Minglu, Li Zhenhua, and Fei Dawei. They take the same decisions for exhibitions inside China as they would in an international context.

Artists and curators will always be innovative and propose ideas that are not immediately acceptable to the establishment. It is interesting to witness this intense interaction between bottom and top. In the long-term, it will lead to the innovation of the whole art scene in China.

3.9 Art as part of the economy

With the change from a planned economy towards a market-oriented economy the position of art also changed. Whereas art had no commercial value in the 1970s or during the preceding Maoist era, the situation altered in the 1980s, and even more

so in the 1990s. Initially there was intense interaction between Mainland China and Hong Kong and a number of Hong Kong galleries such as the Hanart TZ Gallery played a major role in the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art. Also in Shanghai the ShangArt gallery has been of major importance to the careers of many Chinese artists. A number of Westerners, such as Hans Van Dijk, Jochem Noth, Andreas Smith, who happened to be in China just after opening up, as well as private collectors like Uli Sigg, who amassed vast amounts of art in those early days, also had a huge impact on the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art.

Slowly but surely, Chinese and international private galleries started to open across China and art fairs were organized. Art Zones like 798, Caochangdi in Beijing and Moganshanlu in Shanghai have a high concentration of private galleries and artists' studios. On the one hand these areas can be seen as an extended and altered state of the former socialist work unit; on the other they are hubs of the art market in China. Nowadays, private galleries are established virtually everywhere in China.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter investigated the relationship between art and society in general, between the artist and society, and between art and the political framework defined by the one-party state. That framework still assigns an educational mission to art, but at the same time considers art as part of China's economy, which is now market-oriented and interacting within the global context. Thus, on the one hand we recognize the hand of government establishing a dominant discourse, and on the other its strong support for art in China as part of its economic program, enabling artists to gain a place in the global art sphere, allowing private galleries to operate in China and supporting artists and art by creating museums and other platforms.

Many of the artists included in this book are active in the international arena. Most of them are internationally renowned and well integrated in the global art system.

The next chapter will examine the relationship of contemporary Chinese art with China's own cultural tradition. The international dimension will be further discussed in the chapter on the post-colonial context of Chinese art.

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3 Jeanne Boden's interview with Yu Youhan on July 28, 2011 close to his home at Zhaojiabang Lu in Shanghai.

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Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, 1990–1991, ink rubbings on paper made of the Jin Shan Ling section of the Great Wall and mounted on paper, rock, soil. Installation area: approximately 32 x 15m ▶
© Courtesy of Xu Bing

Chapter 4
Post-traditional:
Chinese art between tradition and innovation

4.1 Introduction

In the analysis of Chinese contemporary art, it is not sufficient to only investigate the post-socialist condition. We must also look into the past and consider China's aesthetic tradition. Although contemporary Chinese art is inspired and influenced by global trends and evolutions, in many ways it remains strongly connected to China's rich cultural past. Analysis of Chinese artworks and artists leads us back to traditional philosophies that have underpinned Chinese culture since ancient times such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and also to traditional methods, styles and techniques that are rooted in traditional Chinese art.

Gao Minglu argues that the conceptual Anti-Art Movement in the 1980s inspired by Huang Yongping and Xiamen Dada combined Dadaism with Chan Buddhism and Taoism.[1] Xu Bing claims that Chan Buddhism is innate in Chinese culture, while he also recognizes that it has been widely adopted in the work of numerous masters of Western contemporary art.[2] In China, artists and art critics repeatedly refer to ancient traditions when addressing the spiritual aspect of Chinese art practices, as well as in the analysis of symbols and icons.

It is impossible to pinpoint what influence each of these traditions has had on contemporary art, because in many ways these ideologies overlap and have altered over time. Therefore, rather than going into the specific details of each philosophical tradition, we consider them together as 'the spiritual dimension of art'. China has a tradition of cultivating the spirit, which is part of 'being civilized' (*wenming*). Several artists also claim the *process* of creating, the endless repetition of seemingly senseless actions or movements, is a crucial aspect of their art production. As well as the 'spiritual dimension of art' and the creative process, we find myriad references to China's aesthetic tradition both in theory and practice, in the use of artistic methods and languages and to all kinds of cultural legacies. In the appreciation of Chinese contemporary art this rich heritage cannot be ignored.

4.2 The spiritual dimension of art

In the statements and examples below we discover the deep rootedness of contemporary art in China's artistic and philosophical tradition. Both artists and critics position contemporary art in close relation to the spiritual and aesthetic past. Appreciating art in this context raises the question of contemporaneity. Is contemporary art a continuation of China's tradition?

At first sight one would consider a painter like Ding Yi as an abstract artist. However, both Ding Yi and art critics agree on the deeply rooted spiritual dimension of his work. Ding Yi explains: "It might look repetitive, but in my mind, it's actually an augmentation (…) Buddhists do the same thing when they pray with beads."[3]

Art critics associate Ding Yi's work with concepts and terms such as 'mantra', 'Zen Buddhism', 'emptiness of content' 'sudden realization process of the spiritual experience native to Chinese Buddhism', or position Ding Yi in the neo-literati tradition with his 'hand-created works that bear the marks of traditional Chinese conceptions and that bear those intangible yet spiritual traces of the repeated practice of the use of the brush'.[4]

The search for harmony between opposites, which is the core of traditional Chinese aesthetics, is evident in the terms critics use to describe Ding Yi's work. Gao Minglu uses the term 'Chinese maximalism' to define art like that of Ding Yi in which the spiritual, self-contemplative experience of the artist in the process of creation is crucial.[5] Hou Hanru speaks of 'excessive minimalism' referring to the tension between the formal excessiveness and the minimal nature of structural elements.[6] Li Xu talks about 'meaningless fascination' when confronted with the simple and peaceful images Ding Yi creates.[7] Cao Weijun agrees that "constantly evolving dimensionality, coupled with the spiritual power that accumulates therein, expresses Ding Yi's profound reflections on the era in which he lives."[8] Hou Hanru uses the word 'Tao (*dao*)' to describe Ding Yi's aspiration for simplicity and the blurring of boundaries by the transparency of process

and confusion of motif and background.[9] Li Xianting calls it 'cultivating the mind and soothing the soul'.[10] Numerous other critics use terms like spiritual, religious passion, religious devotion, quasi-religious commitment, boundless determination, silent energy, timeless patience, enduring physical exertion and meditation or contemplation, a spiritual form of living in an interior world in which the self is conquered, and the meaning of life through "negotiation with the emptiness of the content."[11]

Ding Yi elaborates on his work: "In my paintings there is my spirit.[12] My spirit influences my art and my attitude towards art determines my spirit." At the beginning of his career, Ding Yi questioned two things: "One was the question of breaking through the Expressionist style that was popular then; the other was the question of transforming inner energy."[13] For Ding Yi, "the essence of art is not to present symbols on the surface of a canvas, but to use symbolically transformed brush strokes to create an integrated spiritual power of our times."[14] The artist wants to remove all superfluous elements: "I want to filter away any pragmatic elements and return to the essence of the form. The form is the soul."[15]

Xu Bing's work is also associated with the tradition: "… the approach and effect of Xu Bing's art was not the 'sudden enlightenment', but rather a 'gradual enlightenment' more in line with the Zen admonition to 'constantly dust off the Buddha's image, so that not a speck remains'."[16] His *Five Series of Repetitions* from 1987 are compared to the Ten Ox-herding Pictures of Chan Buddhism,[17] the "accumulation of labor, the repetition of simple acts, over and over again, even for years, which give both an authority and a reservoir of meaning" are placed within the Buddhist context.[18] Xu Bing presents "the viewer with a puzzle necessitating a change of mental gears, much as a Chan (or Zen) koan does."[19] Xu Bing's public persona is seen as a "word-shy eccentric, some of the most entertaining and enlightening examples of which have emerged in Chan Buddhist or Daoist contexts. His work is reminiscent of the zany Chan duo Hanshan and Shide, the one poet whose poems, one suspects, were read off a blank page (and later 'compiled' by a suspiciously obscure official), the other illiterate."[20] His conceptual art is interpreted as 'calligraphy merging with painting' and 'looking at poetry, reading painting' (*guanshi duhua*).[21]

Xu Bing himself describes his artistic practice as a kind of *qigong*, a cultivation of the Tao (*dao*): "For more than a year I ceaselessly invented, carved, and printed a set of twelve volumes of Nonsense Writing that no one in this world can understand. The unbelievable amount of work threw the audience into confusion. One of my painter friends once told me about a 'crazy' guy in his village, who always went out to collect waste paper at a certain hour, washing these pieces of paper in a river, carefully mounting them one by one, and then storing them under his bed after they had become dry and flat. I thought quite a long time about this person's behavior. Finally I realized that it was a kind of *qigong* a kind of cultivation of the *Tao*. It was indeed a very powerful kind of *qigong*. [It exemplifies] an Eastern way of achieving true knowledge – obtaining sudden enlightenment and correspondence with Nature by endlessly experiencing a fixed point."[22] For Xu Bing, the significance of a work like *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* "lies in transformation. To realize this idea, the 'effort' was exaggerated and artistic creation was equated with an ascetic practice. The making of rubbings concealed any trace of spontaneity but took the form of a single motions endlessly repeated – pounding the Great Wall a million times."[23]

The work of Yu Youhan refers to Taoism and the cyclical movements of the holistic cosmos. Here he explains his relationship with Taoism in his work and what he wants to present and represent: "After repeated thinking and practice, I chose a simple image – the circle – as the dominant image in my painting, because the circle is stable, representing the beginning and end of all things and symbolizing both a moment and an eternity. The circle represents a repeating circular movement; it also hints at the movement of expansion and contraction. Thus, a circle can symbolize grandness with compatibility, tolerance, rationality and peace. A circle can be a point; it can also be a

gigantic surface. The circle represents both micro particles and macro collections. The enclosed circle further implies tranquility and tension. In the painting, I tried to unite all the opposing elements, such as modesty and wisdom, tranquility and vividness, eternity and levity, something and nothing. Specifically, I want to present the path of intention(s) with my circle series: Firstly, worship of the universe. The boundless, timeless universe has nurtured humanity and each individual. It is worthy of being a subject to eternally worship and eulogize. Lao Tzu said, 'Tao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to ten thousand things'. I want to give a eulogy to the world, eulogizing the beginning of the world: the one. My circle is its representation. A circle is a spiritual representation, a unique system. I want to give praise to ten thousand things. These ten thousand things embody the universe. Things have definite form and I hinted at that by placing characters in my painting.

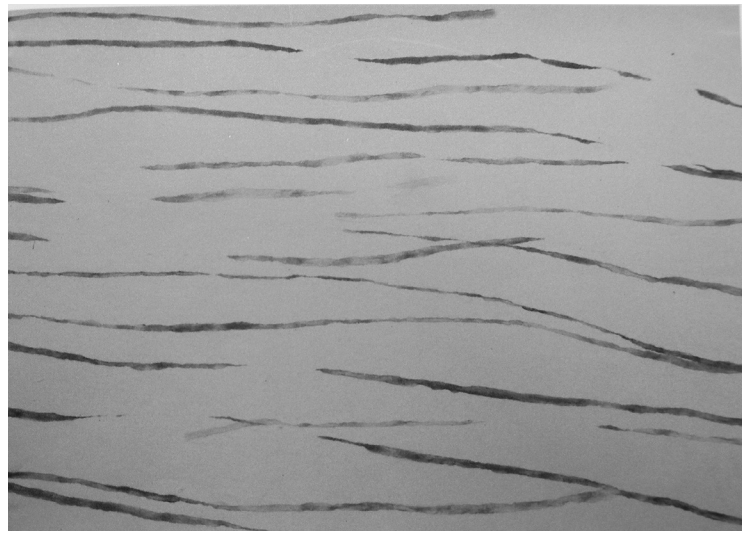
Secondly, worship of the universal spirit means having natural laws according to the development of the universe and its associated thoughts. The universe evolves following a general rule and specific things develop following specific rules. All things are interconnected somehow. General rules must be in harmony with specific rules; and any local actions must obey the universal rule as well. We may refer to it as the universal spirit. Human wrongs are a result of actions working against universal rules. Lao Tzu has stressed 'nature', and 'inaction' in his philosophy. Obeying the universal spirit is to follow nature's rules.

Thirdly, an idealistic imagination of human relations according to the universal spirit is the concrete representation of the universal spirit in our society. The universal spirit does not like and criticizes the unjust intervention in society's daily life by the exploitative actions of the rich and powerful. This is the hope of a society that possesses a high degree of spiritual and material development. Fourthly, the search for a quality lifestyle according to the universal spirit is dependent on an abundance of societal material wealth. However, on a personal level at any given time, thinking individuals can

complete a step further when dealing with life and death, self and others, and material versus spiritual. We should have the right attitude and truthfully fulfill our personal attributes and, at the same time, follow the universal spirit.

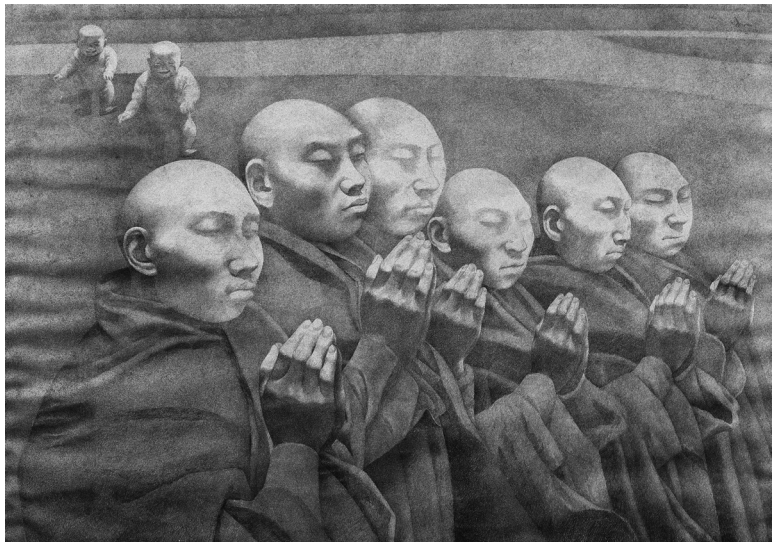
I hope my circle will serve as a representation of the universe and as an embodiment of the universal spirit. The circle also professes my personal ideal: I hope viewers will enjoy the painting I have created and be touched by the spirit within."[24]

Repetitive process and action are also present in the work of Zhang Peili, for example in *Endless Dancing* [25] or in *30x30*, which is an endless repetition of breaking a piece of glass then gluing the fragments back together again. While Paul Gladston sees the influence of Western post-structuralism and the legacy of the Western avant-garde and post-avant-garde, Zhang Peili places his open-ended attitude towards art in the Chinese tradition of Buddhism and 'nothingness as a marker of the illusory nature of worldly things' or in China's vernacular intellectual tradition.[26]



Song Haidong, *Untitled*, 1993
© Courtesy of Song Haidong

Song Haidong decided to turn away from contemporary art after returning from the Venice Biennale in 1993. While his installations of the 1980s show a strong connectedness with society and politics, he now focuses on his inner world. Song Haidong claims that the work *To understand the Way of Chan*, by a Japanese author, as well as a visit to Dunhuang in 1984 and a number of guest lectures in Dunhuang on aesthetics and traditional Chinese literature were extremely influential on him. After Venice he decided to fully engage in Buddhism. Ever since, his work fits into the framework of Chinese traditional art. He describes his need for cultural rootedness: "Originally I wanted to create a kind of visual language that could span various regions and peoples, that everyone who had eyes could perceive. Later I discovered this is problematic. (…) After I participated in Venice in 1993 I turned to abstract art. For a while I used dust on paper. My inspiration for that came from a Japanese artist. Later I started to study Buddhism. When I now create Buddhist art I always feel enriched. When I don't make art, I feel empty (…) One first needs to complete oneself, only then can one make art."[27]



Fang Lijun, *Sketch (no. 6)*, 1989–1990, pen on paper, 76.5 x 110cm
© Courtesy of Fang Lijun

Fang Lijun's sketch from his early period seems to depict monks, but the baldheads (in this case with serene expressions on their faces), are a recurring theme throughout his oeuvre.

Fang Lijun describes his need for inner peace: "I believe if you want to pursue a long-term career, you had better abandon passion (…) if you are confident in yourself with a long-term job, you'll also be required to complete it calmly; this is the case for any occupation. My approach is that when you have inspiration, take out a pen to write it down instead of drawing; a year later if you still feel inspired by this idea then continue to keep it; another three years later, if you have lost the passion but still feel it is a good idea, then you just put it into paintings (…) When you work alone, you don't need good manners any more, for you can arrange your own life according to inner rhythms, experiencing what happens and what disappears, and then coming up with aesthetic feelings. (…) All you need to do is be in a state of accordance with your inner mind."[28] Art critics discussing Fang Lijun's work refer to Buddha and use terms like emptiness,[29] inner liberation and purification.[30]

4.3 The Chinese language as a source of inspiration

Chinese characters are the core and carrier of Chinese culture. The link between language and art is historically close. The Chinese language and handwriting are essential parts of China's calligraphy and ink painting tradition. Although many artists use language as a tool in their work, the art of Xu Bing stands out. Therefore, through his work we will explore how language and writing can become a tool to open up people's minds.

From the beginning of his career, Xu Bing used language systems as inspiration and created his own linguistic world to touch the core of the Chinese culture: "To strike at the written word is to strike at the very essence of culture."[31]

Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (1987) was first shown at the National Gallery in Beijing in 1988. He wanted to cover the entire space – the floor, the ceiling, the walls – with fake

words. He explains: “I carved around four thousand different Chinese characters in total. This is roughly the number of characters in popular usage. I just wanted to make up the words to look like true Chinese words (…) They have elements that resemble more simple, older characters. I wanted people to look at my book and see it as very formal, academic, very serious. Every detail, every chapter, looks very serious, even the binding and print quality.” [32]

The installation consisted of a series of beautifully bound and boxed books arranged in a grid on the floor, giant scrolls arching from the ceiling, and smaller scrolls hung from the walls. In Beijing Xu Bing worked with a small printing house known for making beautifully bound books and facsimiles of classical books. He spent a lot of time studying book printing, so that eventually he was able to distinguish different styles, the Song Dynasty style, the Ming Dynasty style, and so on. He chose a typeface invented by professional engravers during the Song Dynasty that over time had become like the newsprint of today. He wanted to evoke a tension between traditional practices in China, loaded with history and meaning, and the characters that in his hand had turned into an absurd game. Xu Bing elaborates on the creation of his work and the reaction of the public: “I had invented approximately four thousand unreadable characters printed in books and on scrolls, but when visitors first entered the space, they thought that the words they saw were words they could read. However, when they actually tried to read the words, they couldn’t. They thought that some of the words were simply wrong. Then they realized that all of the words were wrong. Their expected response was disrupted. Strictly speaking, a *Book from the Sky* doesn’t have any connection with text, since there is no ‘real’ text, even though it takes the form of books and the appearance of ‘words’. But it does have a connection with writing and printing.” [33]

The artist remembers how his father encouraged him to write calligraphy at the height of the Cultural Revolution. From a young age, writing was part of his education and existence. The seeds for his later artistic work investigating language and communication

were planted there: “I’ve always had a strange relationship with words, familiar but also kind of alienating. When Chinese children learn to write, we spend a lot of time memorizing and tracing characters in calligraphy lessons. My father would ask me to do a page every day. The purpose was not really to learn specific characters, but rather to teach me discipline within a particular cultural framework.” [34]

In analyzing Xu Bing’s work, Nakatami Hajime highlights the importance of the role of writing in China referring to the classical *Yijing* and the interrelation between writing and the cosmos: “The profound complicity between the operation of power and the physical act of writing is a crucial component of what I call the graphic regime (…) especially in China, the sheer physicality of writing has continuously defined the ground parameters of what culture is [35] (…) I want to evoke the ways in which writing serves not only to transcribe a world existing out there, but also to actively shape its implicit order (…) a cosmography in the literal sense of the writing of the cosmos (…) the ideological centrality of scriptures and commentaries not only in Han and post-Han Confucianism but also in religious Daoism and later in Buddhism, and the cosmological authority accorded such graphic systems as the *Classic of Changes (Yijing).*” [36] In line with Nakatami Hajime, Xu Bing refers to the mythological inventor of the Chinese characters: “I always recall the legend of Cang Jie in the Huai Nan Zi. The story goes that in ancient times, when there were no written characters and no drawing, Cang Jie created writing. The heavens were so frightened that they rained millet, and the ghosts were so terrified that they wailed throughout the night. Heaven feared that from that point onward people would attend to trifles and neglect essentials, that they would abandon agriculture for the petty personal profits to be gained from deploying ink and manipulating language.” [37] With this statement Xu Bing places his work in the holistic concept of the universe, implying that writing is also creating.

Xu Bing is also interested in the relationship between language and power. China’s first Emperor Qin Shi eliminated the Six Kingdoms and established his power in a unified

Chinese Empire by creating a unified format of the Chinese language. The simplification of the Chinese script began with the language reform movements in the wake of the Republican Revolution of 1911 and the resulting collapse of the Qing dynasty, and was continued by Mao Zedong for political reasons.[38]

Language and script have always been and continue to be tools of power. With his fake characters, Xu Bing challenges historical authority but he also questions contemporary power relations. His work can be placed in the tradition of imperial historiography, encyclopedia, and political wisdom binding the image of the book to the idea of being civilized (*wenming*).[39]

Xu Bing's characters not only relate to China's central tradition but also to, for example emperor Tang Wuzong in the Tang dynasty, who also circulated fake characters.[40]

The combination of script, power and communication leads Stanley Abe to link Xu Bing's non-existing characters to other forms of writing in Chinese tradition such as the *nüshu* or 'women's writing', an invented script that was developed by women in a isolated area of southern Hunan province and used exclusively for their private conversations. This kind of script suggests a refusal to participate in the conventional forms of writing and can be seen as gendered resistance within a patriarchal society.[41]

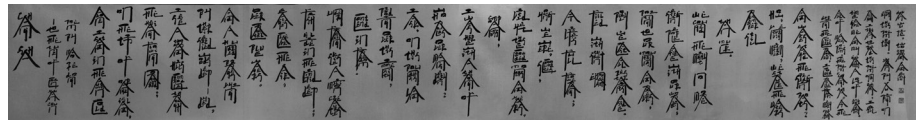
Book from the Sky print board (left) and small wooden sections (right)
© Courtesy of Xu Bing

Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1988, mixed media installation
Scrolls: approx. 95 x 2100cm each; wall panels 96 x 242cm each
© Courtesy of Xu Bing

Xu Bing's writings can also be linked to other languages and cultures, in some cases reflecting their power relations with China. Xu Bing's square script is reminiscent of Phagpa Lama's writing system, which the Tibetan Sakyapa guru invented in the 13th century to render Mongolian understandable for his imperial patron, Khubilai Khan.[42] The non-Sinitic tongues Tangut (relating to Tibetan) and Khitan (relating to Mongolian) were in use from the 10th until at least the 13th century, and both appropriated the outlines of Chinese characters in their written forms. Like Tangut and Khitan, Xu Bing's characters ape Chinese characters and "reflect the awed and perplexed gaze that peoples on the margins of Chinese civilization might have cast on the graphic universe of the Chinese 'center.'"[43] Xu Bing's characters are also reminiscent of Xixia script, one of many Chinese-inspired writing systems. Having one's own script goes beyond practical communication needs, but expresses the desire of possessing one's own cosmography.[44]

Xu Bing ponders over various writing systems in different cultures and how the mind is influenced by language. He loves to confuse people and force them to think differently: "*Square Words* is an attempt to make people consider differences in language and culture. I want them to change their patterns of thought through my oddly constructed 'English' words. In that sense, *Square Words* refers back to *Tianshu [Book from the Sky]*. The piece attempts to break completely with linguistic tradition and asks the viewers or participants to open their minds to new ideas. Usually people are lazy about the way they think. With *Square Words*, I want the audience to collide with conceptual boundaries and reshape habitual modes of considering something. People need to have their routine thinking attacked in this way."[45] Xu Bing wants to make people aware of the different mindsets in different cultures by confronting them with disruptive reading experiences: "Through watching people from around the world write *Square Word Calligraphy*, I can see how it forces their minds to move in nonlinear paths."[46]

Xu Bing rethinks power relations between different languages on a global scale and the need and possibility of having a global language. Here he articulates his problem with English being the so-called global language, implicitly referring to the post-colonial condition of China and other places in the world today: "Our existing languages are based on geography, ethnicity, and culture (including the all-powerful English), and all of them fall short … English cannot become a 'global language' as its relationship with other languages is one of mutual exclusivity."[47]



Xu Bing, *New English Calligraphy – Changsha*, 1996
© Courtesy of Xu Bing

Other artists in this book also explore language. Liu Wei used English in his work from the 1990s and more recently he also uses Chinese characters in his landscapes. Wang Guangyi became world famous with his *Great Criticism Series*, which combined text and images, using both English and Chinese. The work of Ding Yi is also strongly related to writing and calligraphy: the endless repetition of the + and x symbols can be considered a form of writing. Sun Liang combines Chinese characters and images in his ink paintings, and Song Haidong began referring to the pictorial quality of the Chinese language when he turned to traditional art and calligraphy after 1993: "East and West do have some things in common. We can be deeply moved by the same things. But Chinese art is different. We never go into the totally abstract. This has to do with our language. The Chinese characters have a pictorial quality and a link with reality. The same exists in Chinese art. There is always a link with reality."[48]

Geng Jianyi, *Visible Daily Pictures*, 2007, chemigram, 110 x 970cm

Geng Jianyi uses the Chinese language in a variety of ways to explore the relationship between language and the written word and power and tradition. He works a lot with official documents, language being the main conveyer of the message he wants to bring. In early works he played with words on pressed wood. He has also created many 'books' with titles such as *The reason to be classic, Classic, Reading-books*, obliterating the characters or leaving ink traces on paper without real content. In his photographs he uses a kind of script without using real words. Although no real characters appear, his work has a strong flavor of calligraphy. The artwork above is an example of a calligraphy-like photograph and it evokes a classical handscroll.

In my conversations with Wang Ziwei, the artist first claims his total disconnection from tradition. Nevertheless, he uses traditional Chinese characters to sign his name. When we discuss about our future email communication, Wang Ziwei asks me: "Can you read traditional Chinese characters because I am more used to them than the simplified ones."[49] This seemingly random question can almost be considered a statement implying deep layers of meaning. Why is Wang Ziwei, raised with simplified Chinese characters on Mainland China, more familiar with traditional characters? Why does he use traditional characters to sign his work? Maybe his claimed disconnection from China's tradition hides an unconscious connection.

Feng Mengbo is proud of China's calligraphic tradition: "I remember a time when I didn't want to be a Chinese artist; I didn't even want to be Chinese. But these days, I feel quite lucky to be a Chinese guy. I'm so proud of our calligraphic tradition. And I'm very lucky that I can understand a little more than Western people who look at this work. For this kind of calligraphy, you get a lot more out of it if you really know the

Chinese. When I was young, I thought the most important thing was to be a pioneer, but I'm slowly getting old; I'm 43 now, with many white hairs, and I'm interested in the quiet, classical, beautiful traditions. And at the same time, I'm worried about history."[50] Feng Mengbo 'writes' in unexpected ways. For instance, he has created 'calligraphy' by walking around the city with a GPS device.

The idea that writing is creating the cosmos, with deep-rooted aesthetic and philosophical meaning and endless possibilities for styling and restyling, are all hallmarks of the Chinese language and characters, which continue to be treasures Chinese artists draw upon in their work.

4.4 Calligraphy and ink painting tradition in contemporary art

Language and writing bring us to China's calligraphic and ink painting tradition. Although the work of the artists we look at here is considered as contemporary, many find inspiration in this tradition and refer to it in their work. Here we take a closer look at some examples. In some of these artworks the link is obvious. Others, which on the surface appear to have little connection with China's tradition, do in fact have a close connection with it.

Feng Mengbo's relationship with China's ancient tradition is deep. He received basic training in ink painting at art school. He practiced calligraphy for eight years, writing Chinese characters every day. References to traditional Chinese aesthetics can be found in his work. Various critics associate his work with traditional literati painting and particularly the Song Dynasty.[51] Feng Mengbo says he developed a habit of copying ancient paintings. Like all traditional ink painters he copied the Four Wangs to educate himself.[52] Later he developed a computer program to create his own unique 'classical' Chinese landscapes. In Chinese, a landscape painting is referred to as *'shanshui'*, literally meaning 'mountains and water'. Feng Mengbo entitles his work *Wrong Code: Shanshui*. The picture overleaf shows one of his huge landscape installations exhibited at the Rudolfinum, Prague in 2008.

Feng Mengbo, *WCSS2008XL01, Wrong Code: Shanshui 2008XL01*, 2008
1800 x 240cm, Veejet print on canvas
Installation view of 'Chinese Painting', Rudolfinum, Prague, 2008
© Courtesy of Feng Mengbo and ShanghArt Gallery

By creating these landscapes, Feng Mengbo has secured his position among the classical Chinese ink painters. Art critics associate his work with an impressive list of classical masters in the ink painting tradition: Bada Shanren, Ouyang Xun, Yan Zhenqing, Liu Gongquan, Zhang Qian, Shitao, Dong Qichang, Yun Nantian, Wang Jian, Fan Kuan, Wang Ximeng, Fu Baoshi, Guan Shanyue, Wang Zhihuan, Li-Guo tradition, Zhao Boju, Wang Hui, Wang Yuanqi and Qi Baishi.[53]

Sun Liang developed his own artistic and symbolic language for his mythical world full of creatures associated with both Chinese and Western mythology. Trained in traditional ink painting, it is quite natural that Sun Liang's oil painting carries the traces of that tradition. Art critic Wu Liang calls Sun Liang's early period 'ink experimentation' rooted in traditional Chinese ink painting. As such, it can be partly appreciated as a new form of traditional ink painting, and partly as inspired by Chinese prehistoric rock painting and painted pottery, expressed in a manner somewhere between calligraphy and painting.[54] In Sun Liang's unique artistic language, other critics recognize a blending of Eastern and Western cultural resources into an 'orientalization of oil painting'.[55]

His method of drawing an outline resembles that of the fine brushwork in Chinese ink painting. He also uses the traditional landscape painting scroll format. Chinese art critics associate Sun Liang's work with individualist classical Chinese painters such as Xu Wei, Shitao and Wen Zhengming.[56]

Sun Liang tends to use one basic color for his paintings. In the pictures below he chooses blue. These two oil paintings are fine examples of the surreal world Sun Liang creates, but also of his fine brushwork and his technique for creating perspective and depth.

Sun Liang, *Moon Tattoo*, 1996
Oil on canvas, 180 x 140cm
© Courtesy of Sun Liang

Sun Liang, *Gloomy Light*, 1996
Oil on canvas, 180 x 120cm
© Courtesy of Sun Liang

Xu Bing combines calligraphy and ink painting in an innovative way. In *Land Script* he uses a painting technique and calligraphy brushstroke known as *cunfa*, or 'texture strokes', which appear to resemble Chinese characters in order to 'depict' or suggest landscape.[57] His works can be called painting/writing; the two forms are consciously fused together. The influence of other traditional Chinese ink painting techniques and methods can be seen in the use of perspective, causing the eye to evenly roam by eschewing a central focus.[58]

Art critics associate Xu Bing's ink paintings with a long list of classical masters, including Song Dynasty Zhang Zeduan's handscroll *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, Huang Gongwang's 14th century masterpiece *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountain*,[59] as well as Zhang Yanyuan,[60] Zhao Mengfu,[61] Wang Gongxin, Guo Xi, Zhang Tiemei, Gao Jianfu, Ding Yanyong, Zhang Daqian, Li Huasheng, C.C.Wang, Mi Fu,[62] Jia Youfu, Wang Mengqi, Zao Wuji, Lu Xun, Qian Juntao and Lu Xun,[63] and Gu Yuan.[64]

Xu Bing seems to totally immerse himself in his work and the materials he uses: "When a fine blade cuts into a fresh wooden surface, each cut is a decision. This is one sort of dialogue with matter that only we can share. Since what you confront is devoid of content, it cannot interfere with you. Your mind wanders unrestricted, free of superfluous thoughts. Seated there, the atmosphere is rich enough without music. Many thought that I was doing hard labor, but I quite enjoyed the sense of retreat into myself, this cloistered nobility." [65]

Mental preparation is traditionally considered a crucial aspect of being a good artist. Xu Bing says: "All the preparatory work was like a ritual before making a stage entrance." [66] He explicitly refers to *taiji* and the spiritual: "Like *tai chi* [taiji], I have developed my art over a long time, and it has grown to have great spirituality (...) I spent nearly four years just to make one joke." [67] It is the process of creation that is most important as Xu Bing repeatedly states: "I hope to experience the process of expending great effort for a 'meaningless' result," [68] and "the sense of the sublime arises from the deliberate effort to reach a meaningless goal".[69]

The idea of the unity of opposites is a recurring theme in Xu Bing's work. In *Field* below, we see an example of his use of emptiness. The artist starts from a full board and carves until the board is 'empty'.

Xu Bing, *Field*, 1987, paper, 55.5 x 871.5cm
© Courtesy of Xu Bing

Fang Lijun uses traditional ink painting techniques in his work, including seals and a combination of text and images. In the pictures below, we recognize the same cynical atmosphere as in his oil paintings, and similar features such as groups of baldheaded men and the exploration of power relations. The theme of the painting on the left, with people shouting and raising their fists around a central figure who appears completely impotent, has parallels with Fang Lijun's experiences during the Cultural Revolution.

In the painting on the right, Fang Lijun combines text and image. In this 'picture of host and servant' (*zhu pu tu*) the text provides a clue that this work is about power relations and implies that a strong man can do whatever he likes in society. Particularly from the end of the 1990s onwards, Fang Lijun began using more traditional techniques in his work.

Fang Lijun, 1990–1991
Ink painting, 68.8 x 68.5cm
© Courtesy of Fang Lijun

Fang Lijun, 1990–1991
Ink painting, 68.7 x 68.2cm
© Courtesy of Fang Lijun

Even Liu Wei's work, known for its cynical undertones, can be interpreted as a reaction against Confucian family structures,[70] or it can be associated with traditional Chinese art because of 'the fusion of the outward forms and the spiritual unity between the artist and his subjects',[71] the 'brushstroke that expresses a direct sense of (the process of) existence, inner verve and spirit claimed to be qualities in the pursuit of traditional Chinese art'.[72]

Liu Wei's method of 'framing', with the continuation of the painting on the frame, can also be seen as a nod to traditional art, where a 'frame' does not really border and outline the artwork but evokes an extension of the world inside the painting. The way he combines landscape and calligraphy/text, the use of woodcuts and handwriting and his painting techniques (splashing and spattering, painting wet on wet) are for some art critics reminiscent of traditional ink painting techniques.[73]

Various art critics position Liu Wei in the realm of classical Chinese painters of Imperial dynasties (Han, Wei, Jin, Song, Yuan, Ming), and associate him with highly individualist painters such as Xu Wei, Shitao and Guo Xi.[74]

Liu Wei, *We Love Nature*, 1999, oil on canvas, 15 x 150cm
© Courtesy of Modern Chinese Art Foundation

In the painting *We Love Nature*, we recognize the signature pink of Liu Wei's earlier work and the rough brushstrokes, dripping ink and the use of text in combination with images. Liu Wei includes slogan-like expressions such as 'No Smoking', 'No Garbage', 'We Love Nature', 'I Love Flowers', and 'I Love You'. The irony of his earlier work is still apparent. The text 'No Smoking' is placed alongside a skeletal figure, but Liu Wei also adds 'I Like Smoking' onto the body of one of the figures within the heart shape. By doing so he seems to highlight the love of nature and respect for the environment human beings should have, but which is undermined by individual desire.

Ding Yi's work exhibits the meticulous thoroughness typical of handicrafts, often described as traces and accumulations of handwriting and calligraphy. It is also seen to contain other references to traditional ink painting such as composition, unity of opposites, the formats of hanging scrolls, fans and screens, and the five shades of ink used in traditional landscape painting.

Yu Hong, who is first and foremost an oil painter, recently started to research more traditional methods. Borrowing from traditional aesthetics, she has adopted the technique of *xieyi* [75] and also uses traditional materials such as *ruanduan*, a special type of satin, and the Chinese scroll format.[76] She explains her growing interest in China's tradition: "I was never very interested in *guohua* but once I reached the age of 40 I started to be more interested. Now I really like to look at Chinese traditional art and I also started to use more traditional methods such as 'fresh ink'. I look at the paintings of Song Huizong and I'm deeply impressed. I can feel the person behind the painting. At school we never really learned the techniques or aesthetic theory of *guohua*, we only learned the history of Chinese painting." [77]

Zhang Peili is equally aware of the power of ink painting tradition: "With *guohua* we have a totally different tradition than in Western art. In ancient China, culture was 'injected' into the people." [78]

4.5 China's cultural past incorporated in contemporary art

China's cultural past is still alive in many ways in contemporary art. As well as the spiritual process, language, calligraphic and ink painting tradition, a wide variety of other traditions can be found, ranging from China's extensive literary tradition, ancient bronzes, wall paintings and mythology, to more popular traditions like shadow play, the Peking Opera, woodcuts and paper cuts. Exploring the work of the artists featured in this book reveals how traditional Chinese culture is passed down over generations and how much contemporary Chinese art is rooted in China's past.

The work of Fang Lijun is associated with a wide range of historical writers and artists who used cynicism in their work as a counterbalance to the political pressures of their time. "The freewheeling rogue spirit expressive of ennui and nihilism is considered to be a stance adopted throughout ancient history by Chinese intellectuals seeking to escape political darkness. The rogue is the last and staunchest enemy of authoritarianism in Wei-Jin, Yuan and Ming. It is the core of the Wei-Jin masterpiece *New Anecdotes and Worldly Tales (Shishuo xinyu)* and of *Untrammeled Craziness (Rendan pian)*. Liu Ling, Ruan Ji, Zhou Zhongbin are named and Shen Gua in his *Notes from Dream Stream (Mengxi bitan)*, Sun Daya in the *Preface to the Anthology of the Pipes of Heaven* and Lin Yutang are all examples of the same spirit in which Fang Lijun's work is interpreted." [79]

Feng Mengbo finds inspiration in historical shadow play (*piying*) with stories such as *Borrowing Water (Jie Shui)* and *A Tour of Hell (Yu Yin Cao)* performed by famous *piying* actors like Wang Tianwen.[80] He is also knowledgeable of Peking Opera, not only from the Cultural Revolution but also classical Peking Opera with famous actors like Mei Lanfang.[81] Feng Mengbo remembers reading the classical *Book of Songs* when he was young.[82] His work is associated with classical literature and the poetry of Su Dongpo,[83] the *Three Kingdoms*,[84] *Journey to the West*, Huanzhu Louzhu's *Romance of the Swordsmen of Shu Mountains* [85] and *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden (Jieziyuan Huazhuan)*, a copybook to master traditional ink painting.[86]

Li Shan's work is embedded in tradition with references to the rock paintings of Jiangjun, the relics of Hemudu (which deeply influenced him), cast bronze vessels from the Shang and Zhou,[87] China's ancient script,[88] ancient pictographs, traditional ceramics,[89] Neolithic wall paintings, tortoiseshells, the Peking Opera, New Year prints and folk art tradition.

Sun Liang's work refers to Chinese mythology such as the goddess *Nuwa*,[90] legends like the *Bird Jingwei* and *Hou Yi Shooting the Sun (Hou Yi she ri)*.[91]

Yu Hong focuses on contemporary China, and more specifically on her own life and surroundings. But recently, China's tradition has started to inspire her. "Dunhuang inspires me a lot. I have a lot of interest in sculpture and carvings, like the work of the Northern Wei." [92] In *Golden Sky* (2009–2011), *Questions for Heaven* is inspired by *Apsara and Bodhisattvas*, a Tang Dynasty painting from Cave No. 321 of the Dunhuang Magao Grottoes in Gansu China. *Sky Curtain* is inspired by *Four Great Events*, 450–700 AD, Cave No. 205 of the Kizil Thousand Buddha Grottoes, Xinjiang. The content of her oil paintings has shifted, as have the methods and artistic language she uses.

Here she explains her relationship with China's cultural heritage: "I remember reading *Hongloumeng* in a classical edition. I found it difficult to read, not only because I was not used to the traditional Chinese characters, but also because I had to read from top to bottom while I had been taught to read from left to right. I also read other classics like *San Guo*." [93]

Yu Hong also explains how she sees the differences between Chinese and Western tradition, and how China has dealt with this through the ages: "I think it is very interesting to see the differences between Chinese and Western literature. Chinese literature is always about facts, about how people dress, where they are, what they say and so on, while Western literature is much more about the psychology of the people,

how they feel, about what is going on inside of them. There are also big differences in art traditions. In traditional Chinese art, the human being is always depicted extremely small because we consider human beings as being tiny parts of nature, while in the West the human being is at the center of everything. Therefore portraits depict human beings very large, as if they were a kind of deity. The classical Chinese philosophies like Confucianism and Taoism are in the head of every Chinese person. Our mind works like the *taiji* pattern. I think China has been influenced a lot throughout the ages, but the Chinese always make everything Chinese, no matter if it is Western or something else. For instance, Buddhism was introduced in China and the Chinese made their own version of it. That happens with all influences, also in art." [94]

Yu Hong, *Figure and Ground*, 2005
Silk, fabric color, 600 x 110cm
© Courtesy of Yu Hong

Yu Hong, *Gymnastics Education*, 2006
Silk, fabric color, 600 x 110cm
© Courtesy of Yu Hong

Zhang Peili shares his views on tradition as follows: "I think my father received more traditional influence than I did. My grandfather was a landlord. In some way he was very traditional, the girls could not eat at the same table as the boys, everyone had to be very polite and relationships were ordered according to age. He had more than ten children. But he was also open-minded because he sent his daughters to school, which

was unusual at the time. He had a lot of paintings. My father was brought up like that. Everyone practiced calligraphy. (…) When I was young I liked to read *Shuihu Zhuan, San Guo, Xi You Ji*. No one told me I had to; I just liked it." [95]

4.6 Conclusion

The post-traditional context of contemporary Chinese art has huge influence at many levels. The Chinese in general, and Chinese artists in particular, are very aware of this rich aesthetic tradition and it naturally influences their art. This can be detected in the artists' statements above. Chinese critics are also aware of this tradition and interpret contemporary Chinese art in this light.

The 'spiritual aspect' of the process of creation is perceived as part of China's aesthetic tradition. China's calligraphic and ink painting tradition is related to this and remains an endless source of inspiration. References to tradition span a period of millennia, from ancient bronzes and mythology to more recent art forms such as the Peking Opera and shadow play.

Several artists mention Buddhist art from Dunhuang. What surfaces strongly is the rich literary tradition that artists can draw from. Many artists mention classics such as the *Book of Changes (Yijing)* and other great classical novels.

After the Opium War, modernization was forced onto China. But modernization did not destroy China's rich cultural heritage and contemporary artists use this in many ways in their work. Therefore, rather than simply appreciating contemporary Chinese art in the light of the classical Western-dominated cannon and Western-based theories, the post-traditional context of contemporary Chinese art should be taken into consideration in the appreciation of contemporary Chinese art.

The East-West context of contemporary Chinese art will be discussed in the next chapter focusing on the post-colonial.

1 Gao Minglu, 2005, p 65.

2 Xu Bing in *Yishu*, 2002, Vol 1 No 1, p 15.

3 Ding Yi in Nuridsany, Ding Yi, 2004, pp. 91–98.

4 Kung, Lu, Sun, 2006, pp. 16 & 19.

5 Gao Minglu, 2003.

6 Hou Hanru, 2005, (no page numbers in catalog).

7 Li Xu: http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2004/07/16/32206.html (consulted 22/06/2011).

8 Cao Weijun in Spinsanti, Scanu, 2009, p 65.

9 Hou Hanru, 2005, pp. 16–18.

10 Li Xianting, Prayer Beads and Brush Strokes/*nianzhu yu bichu*, Beijing Toyo Art Projects, 2003, p 5.

11 Hou Hanru, 2005, (no page numbers in catalog).

12 Ding Yi, in Colonnello: http://www.stiftelsen314.com/exhi_prog/zhang/index2.html (consulted 22/06/2011).

13 Ding Yi, Manbo, Skira, 2009, p 71.

14 Ding Yi, 1991, unpublished, quoted in Fei Dawei, 2008, p 129. Pictures are available in the Special Collection Room at the AAA in Hong Kong.

15 Ding Yi, 1991, unpublished, quoted in Fei Dawei, 2008, p 129. Pictures are available in the Special Collection Room at the AAA in Hong Kong.

16 Gao Minglu, 2009, p 30.

17 Berger, in Yeh Wen-hsin, 2000, p 89.

18 Hay Jonathan, "Ambivalent icons" *Orientations* 23, no 7, July 1992, p 38, quoted in Chow, 2000, p 237.

19 Erickson, 2004, p 82.

20 Goodman, "Bing Xu' p 999, quoted in Berger, Yeh, 2000, p 93.

21 Gao Minglu, 2009, p 35.

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26 Gladston, 2009, p 56.

27 http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=96 (the interview transcript is available in Mandarin. I translate what is relevant).

28 Fang Lijun in Shu Kewen, "'Lucky' Fang Lijun Has His 'Reasons'"/*Xingyun de Fang Lijun you tade liyou*, Kosararova, 2008, pp. 19–21.

29 Li Xianting, Jose, 1997, pp. 93–94.

30 Jose, 1997, pp. 93–94.

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41 Abe Stanley K., No Questions, No Answers: China and A Book from the Sky, in: Chow Rey, ed., 2000, p 227.

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48 Jeanne Boden's interview with Song Haidong, 2011, Shanghai.

49 Jeanne Boden's interview with Wang Ziwei, 2011, Shanghai.

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52 Feng Mengbo, Wrong Code: Shanshui, 2007, pp. 4–5.

53 Kesner, in Kosararova, 2008, pp. 26–27.

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55 Fang Zengxian, preface to the catalog: Jiang Mei, Sun Liang, 2006.

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64 Cantz Hatje, 2006, p 284.

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76 Piëch Xenia, 2007, p 59.

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92 Jeanne Boden’s interview with Yu Hong on July 31, 2011 at her studio in 798 Art Zone, Beijing.

93 Jeanne Boden’s interview with Yu Hong on July 31, 2011 at her studio in 798 Art Zone, Beijing.

94 Jeanne Boden’s interview with Yu Hong on July 31, 2011 at her studio in 798 Art Zone, Beijing.

95 Jeanne Boden’s interview with Zhang Peili on July 29, 2011 in Hangzhou.

Yu Hong, *Gymnastics Education / Ticao jiaolian*, 2006, silk, textile paint, 600 x 110cm ▶

Chapter 5
Post-colonial:
Chinese art between China and the West

5.1 Introduction

Global power relations of past centuries continue to influence the position of non-Western art and artists today. Local conditions and contexts can be specific, as in the case of China, influencing the viewpoints of artists vis-à-vis the local and the global. As a third condition of contemporary Chinese art, we explore the relationship of Chinese artists with the global and the local.

Creating art in a Chinese context is connected with the global dimension and with China's relationship with the West. Chinese artists tend to have a high awareness of 'the West', a concept that the Chinese often refer to as being different from 'China'. The general position of Chinese art in the global art context may influence the way individual Chinese artists negotiate their position in that art world.

Creating art in a Chinese context is also connected to the local and to the awareness of one's Chinese background, culture and education. For some artists this background is vague and unconscious, while others can pinpoint what being 'Chinese' means for them. Still others claim to have typical Chinese elements and features in their art. Chinese artists try to position themselves in the complexity of global and local influenced by all kinds of power relations. They try to be Chinese and global at the same time.

This chapter first investigates how artists discovered the West and Western art after China opened up and started to experiment and break away from politics. We then examine a number of statements on whether Chinese artists perceive their art as Chinese or not. Finally we explore the complex relationship Chinese artists have with the West and the different positions they take vis-à-vis the global art context.

5.2 Discovering non-Chinese art and taking a position

Early exhibitions on Western art in post-1978 China had a major influence because Chinese artists were suddenly confronted with non-Chinese art, in many cases for the first time in their lives. The exhibitions of French art and the Boston Museum collection

at the end of the 1970s were certainly influential, but maybe even more so was the Rauschenberg exhibition in Beijing in 1985, because nobody in China had ever seen work like that before. From that moment onwards, new materials began to circulate and many works about art, literature and philosophy were translated into Chinese.

It is important to realize that the countless books on Western art and culture that were simultaneously translated into Chinese in the 1980s were totally disconnected from the context in which they had been written. Translations of all kinds of Western concepts, ideas and theories poured into China. The climate in the 1980s was vibrant, but also confusing. It resulted in an eclecticism of artistic styles.

Chinese artists who had moved to the West in the 1930s–1940s, such as Zhao Wuji and Wu Guanzhong, had a deep influence on developments in art on Mainland China in the 1980s. They published articles on art theory, on abstract art in China and functioned as bridges between Chinese art and Western art.

China made the transition from a restricted, closed off space to a more liberalized one. A major influence on the explorative atmosphere that followed was the discovery of global art, or rather the discovery that out there, beyond the China in which the artists had grown up, another world existed, with other dynamics and rules, offering new possibilities and excitement. This had an extremely stimulating effect and resulted in intensive experimentation.

After the period of experimentation, individual artists found their own artistic language and a position in the Chinese art world, and for many, a position in the global art world. In the statements below, we discover the experiences, evolution and viewpoints of the artists in focus.

Song Haidong describes the hunger for information other than what was officially available in art school in the 1980s and the discovery of Western and other non-Chinese art and philosophy: "We were very interested in books and magazines on

foreign art. Zha Li's English was very good. He translated several books. One of my fellow students, Wang Qiang, a friend of Zhang Peili, lent me Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art*. He told me not to give it to anyone else. I copied it by hand. This was before it was published. There was another book by Herbert Read on contemporary painting that many people mentioned. I tried to read Nietzsche and I was already happy if I understood some of it (…) I saw an artwork that had the flavor of Francis Bacon's *Bishop* made with all kinds of material and with a light inside. There was the influence of Mexican art. (…) When I first entered the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts [China Academy of Art] we went to Shanghai to an exhibition of Jean Helion. His work is a bit like Picasso and Cubism. I found the exhibition very inspiring. Another exhibition I liked was a collection from the Boston Museum at the Shanghai Museum (…) I did not see the Rauschenberg exhibition." [1]

The confrontation with the *reality* of Western art when he participated in the 1993 Venice Biennale, however, led Song Haidong to reflect and take a radical decision: "I went to Europe and I discovered that modern art there is connected to their tradition, for instance in France. I also met a Korean artist who was a Buddhist monk with a big bell in front of him as a kind of installation. Now and then, he would bump his head into the bell and it would resound through the whole exhibition, loud and clear. That had something to do with his cultural background. What we did had nothing to do with our tradition." [2] This experience in Venice caused a shift in Song Haidong's work. While at the beginning of his career Song Haidong only wanted to experiment with new things and was influential as an innovative artist, after his confrontation with the reality of the West he abruptly stopped being a contemporary artist and 'returned' fully to Chinese tradition, becoming as he describes it an artist who writes calligraphy and creates Buddhist art.

Ding Yi remembers how he learned about Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Utrillo, Camille Pissaro and Alfred Sisley via a series of Japanese magazines that described the history of Impressionism and Cubism and introduced the Great Masters.

After opening up there was the the Picasso exhibition and the Boston collection, which introduced American abstract art. One of the most influential translations from the West was *A brief history of modern painting (Xiandai huihua jianshi)*. Other important publications were Art Collection/*Meishu Congkan*. Although these channels were not an ideal source of detailed information, they still had a deep impact on the artist: "The pictures in the book were very small and in black and white but we got the basic message." [3] Ding Yi recalls the first time he saw European art in a large exhibition.[4] He became very interested in the work of Maurice Utrillo whose depictions of Paris reminded him of Hangkou in Xuhui district Shanghai during his formative years. It was by imitating Utrillo and painting Shanghai to resemble Paris that his technique improved. New materials and information gave impulse to experimentation.

Ding Yi recollects that at the time he entered art school, many things from Western culture, new artistic concepts and philosophies were being translated into Chinese. He remembers going to the bookshop every weekend to buy books and reading them taught him about contemporary art. At the same time he was experimenting with new artistic styles and trying to find his own style.[5] "I can truly say that I was influenced by certain Western artists such as Mondrian or the 1970s American artist Frank Stella." [6] It was only later that he discovered other artists: "In the 1980s, when I started working with crosses, I was making a break from Chinese traditional painting. At that time in China, we knew nothing about artists like Buren." [7]

He also remembers the performance hype of the mid-1980s in which he actively participated: "When we organized a performance we had some basic knowledge about Beuys but it was very fragmented. I also saw Christo's wrapped art, but I think the major reason we used performance art was because at that time we thought it was the strongest way to express ourselves." [8] He acknowledges the influence from the West, but from the very beginning of his artistic career Ding Yi was radical in overthrowing any tradition and going back to the essence of art.

He had to wait until 1993 before he could experience the reality of the West and see real Western art on a large scale: “In 1993 we received the invitation to participate in the Venice Biennale. It was my first real contact with the West.” [9]

But the confrontation with Western art also provoked questions: “When I visited contemporary Chinese art exhibitions in the West between 1993 and 1996 I thought the choice of artworks clearly reflected a certain mentality. It gave the impression that most of contemporary Chinese art was politically inspired. It made me very suspicious about Western cultural judgment.” [10]

Yu Youhan recalls his discovery of Western art: “In the 1970s it was very difficult to get information about anything, but in the 1980s it became easier. There were some magazines and a number of exhibitions that had a major influence. In 1978, there was the exhibition of Zhao Wuji, plus the *French Village landscape exhibition* in Shanghai (*Faguo nongcun fengjing huazhanlan*), which had huge impact, introducing us to Barbizon, Impressionism, Monet, Fauvism, André Derain, George Braque and Raoul Dufy. They all influenced us.” [11] He refers to Marcel Duchamp’s general influence and how he found inspiration in the work of other artists: “The simple abstract work of artists such as Jackson Pollock and Rothko had an influence on me,” [12] but also “Cezanne led me away from naturalism. It does not matter whether the subject is a landscape, still life or a person; I approach it from the formal aesthetic viewpoint of Constructivism. In this way, the composition becomes more intense in style and color and the relation of its individual parts becomes harmonized.” [13] He remembers the impact of the exhibition of Chinese painters like Zhao Wuji who left China in the 1930–1940s. Yu Youhan considers himself as a pioneer in Political Pop: “The ‘Political Pop’ was a new direction when I was doing it.” [14] He acknowledges inspiration from the West, but at the same time he strongly states that he was innovative in Chinese art.

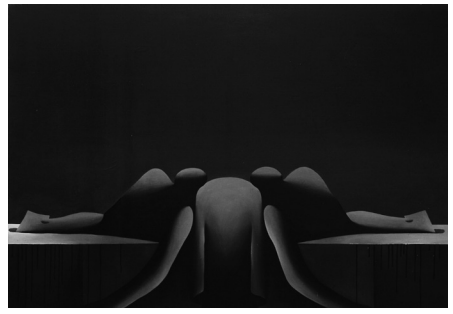
Although best known as a painter, in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition Li Shan performed *Washing Feet*. In spite of claiming disinterest in international politics, he

used a picture of Ronald Reagan and he has also used other political leaders such as Gorbachev and Bush in his work. When Li Shan attended the Venice Biennale in 1993, the only work that shocked him was the part-animal, part-human *Loughton Candidate*, created by the young artist Matthew Barney.[15]

Later in his career Li Shan started to make artwork exploring genetic manipulation. He is now recognized for his engagement in international dialogue, raising questions about the hypocrisy and lack of equality in human values in today’s politically informed, bio-scientific experiments and reflecting on genetic manipulation and its aftereffects.

Wang Guangyi recalls his library visits in the 1980s and his confrontation with Expressionism, Matisse, Cezanne, Picasso, classical painters like Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Ingres, and Poussin, but also Western philosophy with Hegel and others.[16] But he and the *North Art Group* were mainly concerned with creating a new kind of rational art: “Rational art was to be a philosophical method, a kind of science, which they called metaphysical art (*xing’ershang de yishu*). Rational art had to provide a framework to establish a new methodological and spiritual order that should overcome former aesthetic and conceptual patterns, such as self-expression, and should help to avoid simple imitation of Western patterns.” [17]

Wang Guangyi started from a critique of both occidental and traditional Chinese culture, resulting in the *Frozen North Pole* paintings and the *Post-Classical Series* in the mid-1980s.



Wang Guangyi, *Post-Classical – Death of Marat A*, 1987, oil on canvas, 116 x 166cm

Wang Guangyi took a strong position from the very beginning of his career. He was determined not to kowtow to Western art, adopting "a position that was neither subordinate nor dominant, but equal, untainted by fear or arrogance".[18] For the 1986 *Post-Classical Series* Wang Guangyi started to rework a number of masterworks of classical Western art such as Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, Renaissance masterpieces and 17th century French and Italian art. He pored a layer of black paint over a reproduction of a painting and left it to drip.

The artist carved out "his own niche amid the schools of European and American painting, or to be exact, he found a piece of fertile ground somewhere between Beuys and Warhol on which to build his own tower of art".[19]

The image below is one of the *Great Criticism Series* that Wang Guangyi started to create in 1990, a style he continued to use for many years. In this series he combines famous brands, artist's names or other symbols such as Gucci, Rolex, Cartier, Swatch, Canon, Coca Cola, Louis Vuitton, Walt Disney, WTO, Andy Warhol with the iconic language of the Cultural Revolution. In the example below he uses his own name.

Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism: Wang Guangyi*, 2005, oil on canvas, 400 x 300cm
© Courtesy of Wang Guangyi

Geng Jianyi says: "It is difficult to say concretely what influence I received from the West. First of all there was all the Russian art we were educated in. In the 1980s, contacts with Western art brought a new dynamism that was inspiring. I saw the Rauschenberg exhibition. It was a bit strange to see that in Beijing. Of course there was some imitation in the first stages after discovery. But afterwards we began doing our own thing. Later on I think I created work in which neither nation or people played a role. In the West, artists also inspire each other."[20]

However, in a statement in one of his works, Geng Jianyi seems to take a very clear position vis-à-vis Western art, mockingly referring to Duchamp and implicitly criticizing Western dominance of the art world. Because this is also a fine example of Geng Jianyi's investigation of bureaucracy and power relations, I reproduce the full text:

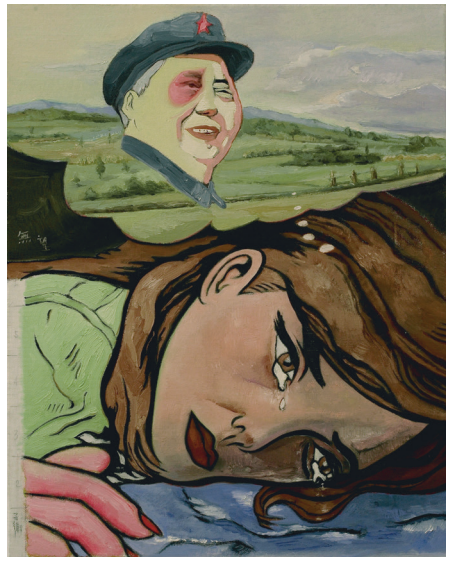
Overall plan of the signing session at the 'Avant-Garde Cup' Grand Prix
(*Qianwei bei. Xiandai yishujia jianming da jiangsai huodong jihua*):

"It is imperative we take scientific measures to confer honors on modern masters of Chinese art in order to create a stable investment climate enabling Chinese artists to enter the international market. 'R. MUTT', the signature used on the masterpiece 'Spring [Fountain]' by Duchamp, the father of modernism, will be taken as the standard. The rules of fair play will be observed, everyone being equal at the urinals, and the announcement of the winner will be made on the spot. Representatives from all walks of life will be invited to attend. Representatives from graphological and modern art history circles will be invited. The judging panel will be composed of the leaders of modern art villages. A protocol company will be asked to preside over the proceedings and 20 hostesses in yellow cheongsams and sashes will attend. They should be present at the designated time and arrive at the designated positions shown in the sketch. A notary from the departments concerned will supervise the activities. The dates and methods for registration will be publicized and the 50 earliest applicants will be chosen and placed in separate categories. The successful applicants will be

notified by mail. Slogans will be chosen and decided upon. These may include ‘You’ve got to be in it to win it’, ‘Don’t hide your talents under a bushel’, ‘Live for fame’, or ‘The geniuses are here before you’. The contest will open at 19:00 on the designated day and leaders from departments of culture and propaganda will make speeches followed by a noted critic presenting his report on the relationship between modern arts criticism and modern artists. Then the chairman will announce the competition rules. The clean porcelain urinals provided by hardware dealers will be placed on numbered tables, and participants will mount them to initiate the standard signature ‘R. MUTT’ after dividing into groups and being numbered. No changes should be made to the imitation signatures. The hostesses will then pass the judges’ stand in pairs, with the signed urinals in their hands. The judges will then assess each signature on the basis of style, size, position and other details. The secretary will work out the average score for each signature and determine, from the last five groups, three Masters of Modern Arts (MMAs), six Vice Masters of Modern Arts (VMAs) and fifteen Modern Artists (MAs). With the music ‘Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman’ blaring, cash prizes, certificates and urinals will be presented as trophies to the winners by culture and propaganda department heads, and representatives of those departments and sponsors. End of contest. The money needed for the contest will be provided by cooperative enterprises, although the detailed costs (including 5% taxes) are yet to be decided. The plan is to seek cooperation with enterprise managers who have a modern sensibility and to explore the healthy combination of art and business. Those interested in the plan should contact: Wang Youshen, Beijing Youth Daily, 66 East Third Ring Road, Chaoyang District. Post code: 100021.” [21]

As of 1987, Wang Ziwei used Mao’s image. He sarcastically claims his relationship with the West is: “(…) purely business. If they want Mao Zedong I will paint Mao Zedong. They don’t know anything anyway. I used to work with the Hanart Gallery in Hong Kong. They had knowledge about Chinese art, but in the West they don’t know anything about Chinese art. So I just paint what they want.” [22]

Wang Ziwei, *Goodbye Kiss*, 2010,
oil on canvas, 40.5 x 50.5cm
© Courtesy of Wang Ziwei



Wang Ziwei, *Hopeless*, 2010,
oil on canvas, 35.5 x 45.5cm
© Courtesy of Wang Ziwei

Wang Ziwei, *Mao Zedong with Moustache*, 2010,
oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm
© Courtesy of Wang Ziwei

Wang Ziwei looks at Western Pop Art but he is also clearly indebted to Picasso, Roy Lichtenstein and Marcel Duchamp. The paintings depicted on page 223 (all three painted in 2010) have clear links to Western artists. The influence of Picasso is obvious in *Goodbye Kiss* where the head of Mao Zedong towers over a Cubist-like kissing couple, almost identical to Picasso's *The Kiss*. At first sight the similarities in style and content prevail. But when taking a closer look at Wang Ziwei's work, we can detect the Chinese world in which it is set and the background against which the couple is depicted introduces a different context. Whereas Picasso's couple are hidden away from the world, in the cozy privacy of a room closed off with bright white and blue striped curtains, the kissing in Wang Ziwei's painting takes place under the scrutinizing eye of Mao Zedong who towers over the couple. Mao Zedong is depicted in a more realistic style than the couple, and his image is not deconstructed. Mao's gaze, not fixed on the couple, looks straight into the eye of the spectator as if to say that his gaze encompasses the whole world and nothing escapes it. Mao Zedong wears his familiar Mao suit, which stretches out over the shoulders of the kissing man and woman as if he wants to cover up their actions. There is no time for eroticism or sex or privacy in Mao's China. The emptiness of the background seems to reinforce Mao's dominance over the kissing couple. While in Picasso's painting the man has long hair and a lively face, in Wang Ziwei's work the man's head is shaved and he looks exhausted. Does Wang Ziwei refer to re-education with the shaved head? Does the title *Kissing Goodbye* refer to a farewell?

Hopeless is almost the same as Lichtenstein's *Hopeless*, but hopelessness in Wang Ziwei's painting is not induced because of love, but rather because of Mao. *Mao Zedong with Moustache* obviously refers to Marcel Duchamp's *Mona Lisa*.

Wang Ziwei often uses popular icons from Western comics such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy and he uses Christian symbols in the same fashion as the Disney figures in combination with Chinese elements. Wang Ziwei's work is often playful and light, but a closer look reveals hidden layers.

Yu Hong recounts her discovery of the West as follows: "Western art had a deep influence on me because I am an oil painter. I was raised with the smell of oil paint and I still love that smell. I was taught to draw following Russian and Western classical techniques. I learned very little *guohua*. After graduating, I started to do more modern things. I am not solely interested in art from the West. I also discovered the beauty of Egyptian, Mexican, Indian and Cambodian art. We learned very little about these cultures, but when I went to those places I was really impressed with the beauty of their art. I went to Berlin in 1993 where I had an exhibition. That was the first time I left China. We also went to France. We visited many museums and I was really surprised by the art of the Middle Ages. At school we were told that the Middle Ages had been a dark period. We did learn about the Greek and Roman tradition but then we had jumped to the Enlightenment. We learned nothing about the Middle Ages so there was a gap. I was impressed when I saw the work in real life. I had mainly seen pictures of it in books and magazines. We also went to the US at that time. We stayed in New York for about a year, just absorbing the atmosphere and going to exhibitions."[23]

Natural Selection is inspired by Francisco de Goya's *Ridiculous Folly* (1820–1823).[24] Yu Hong replaces all heavenly creatures by ordinary contemporary Chinese people. The use of gold has a special meaning: "The gold in my paintings is related to classical works. Many paintings from the Middle Ages have gold-leaf backgrounds, and classical Chinese works, such as scrolls that have been lying around for hundreds of years, take on a golden hue as they age. That's the historical perspective."[25]

Yu Hong's *Ladder to the Sky* is inspired by a medieval painting from St Catherine's Monastery in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. In the original work, people ascend a ladder to heaven where Jesus awaits them reaching out his hand. Yu Hong's painting measures 6 meters by 6 meters. On her ladder there are ordinary people, some of them falling off like in the original work, but there is no Jesus waiting for them. The ladder goes into the sky and instead of all the people going up, some of them are coming down. Yu Hong

was strongly inspired by the original painting but she has removed the religious aspect. Yu Hong has a balanced position between China and the West. She finds inspiration in both.

Yu Hong, *Ladder to the Sky*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 600 x 600cm

Zhang Peili recalls his initial confrontation with the West in the 1980s and how he found his artistic language. But he reacts strongly to criticism that says his work resembles that of Western artists. When China opened up, he discovered that the Chinese had been kept uninformed about what was happening outside. His discovery of the West

resulted in an eagerness to explore: “When we went to school we learned about the US and Europe. We learned that all the people there were very poor, that no one looked after the elderly, that there were continuous wars going on. When China opened up we saw this had been one big lie. By reading books from the West we discovered that our basic problems in life are exactly the same. We are all human beings. But saying that Chinese artists had nothing at all in their heads after China opened up and just absorbed everything that was Western is complete nonsense. The French Village exhibition and a collection from the Boston Museum were inspiring; there were not so many exhibitions at the time. Many people went to see them. At school there were lectures by foreigners. All these new things made us react very strongly against the government’s control of art. In the 1950s, China adopted Russian art. In art schools, the techniques and methods were borrowed from Russia. We were tired of that. We really had enough of it. At the time, many Chinese artists, like those from Sichuan, went to Tibet or other remote places to find inspiration for their art. Why would we have to go to other places to find inspiration? Gauguin has also painted Tahiti, but that was different because he really lived there. We wanted to show the environment in which we lived. We wanted to show our own experience in our work. That is how the *Xin Kongjian* came into being.” [26]

He describes the discovery of many new things and how they changed life in China: “China was very poor in the 1970s. We had nothing at all. Then came the Western influence. We got TVs, cars, Coca Cola. Our houses changed, our environment changed. If everything about one’s living conditions changes, it is unthinkable that this would not be reflected in one’s thinking. Confucius is important, but he lived in a time when there was only horse and cart. We cannot simply apply his thinking to these modern times. With globalization, the West and China influence each other. The West also had the Enlightenment, which freed people’s minds. When I read Kafka, Becket, Sartre, Marquez, or see films by Ingmar Bergman I realize that our problems are exactly the same. We [Chinese] do not absorb things like little children. I have

my own life experience, my own way of thinking."[27] Zhang Peili is sensitive to critic's comparisons of his work with Western artists: "I started to make video art in the 1980s and Westerners tend to say that I got the idea from the West. I can only say that the conditions were right in China to make video art. I had maybe read two sentences about video art somewhere and seen a picture of a few centimeters. That was all. I did not know any video artists. Video art started in the West because the material and the conditions provided the possibility. The same counts for me. We got televisions in the 1980s, a camera and that was it."[28]

He argues that he discovered Gary Hill at the Centre Pompidou when he visited Paris in 1996 but his own work was already completed before that time. He asserts that his work and that of Gary Hill are coincidentally similar. He was not aware of the artist when he originally created his work.[29]

Zhang Peili is strongly aware of his negotiating position between politics and individual artistic freedom, and also between China and the West. He formulates strong opinions defending his artistic choices and criticizes the lack of equal dialogue between China and West.

What is most important in these individual stories is not so much who and what the Chinese artists discovered after China opened up, but the fact that this opening up suddenly brought a wave of information, new art methods and styles to China, adding oil to the fire of breaking free from the politically imposed curriculum. In hearing these testimonies about the 1980s, one can almost feel the excitement there must have been when all kinds of materials were suddenly translated into Chinese and became freely available. One can also imagine how great the shock must have been when these artists were invited to Venice in 1993 and were confronted for the first time with the international art scene and with exhibiting their work in a totally unfamiliar context. Various artists articulate their shock at this confrontation. In the case of Song Haidong, this led to a realization that China had its own tradition. For Ding Yi, it was noticing that

curatorship was Eurocentric, and in the case of Li Shan, it was discovering totally new art. It is safe to say that participation in the 1993 Venice Biennale was an alienating and at the same time enlightening experience for many of them.

Various art critics and artists call the influence of Western art in China an influence of imagined styles from the West. Due to the lack of real information in the 1980s, Chinese artists fantasized that anything was possible in art in the West. The Chinese more or less borrowed wholesale from Western art history and explored all kinds of styles and methods. Of the myriad new developments, it was mainly Political Pop and Cynical Realism that spread to the West as Chinese art in the 1990s. The distinctiveness of the symbols used in Political Pop paintings, such as images of Mao Zedong, made it possible for the international public to immediately recognize them as Chinese. This had a huge impact on the way contemporary Chinese art was received in the West in the decades that followed, leading to simplifications, wrong perceptions and misunderstandings.

The idea that Chinese contemporary art would be an extension of Western art is immediately undermined once this context is grasped. The eclecticism in Chinese art reflects the confusion of that time and the fragmented experience of everyday life in a rapidly changing China. Exploring everything Western art history had produced was merely a tool to break away from political standards. The sheer contemporaneity of all the styles used over a period of less than a decade speaks for itself. These Chinese artists had been trained and educated in art, but they had hardly seen anything else but realistic oil painting and ink painting. The so-called 'imitating' or 'copying' of Western art in the 1980s must be seen in relation to the exploration of China's own tradition. This shows more the *zeitgeist* of experiment than individual artistic paths. On the other hand it also reflects the flexibility of the artists in exploring new languages and media.

From the statements above we can detect the complexity of the relationship of Chinese artists with the West and with the global art scene. In the 1980s many artists were

inspired by Western art. Over the decades we can detect a variety of attitudes, ranging from finding inspiration in Western art, defending their position as a Chinese artists vis-à-vis the West, rejecting patronizing post-colonial attitudes, playing on the commercial success of Chinese art in the West, or taking a balanced stance. Each of the artists in focus here deals in a very different way with the global art scene and has individual ideas about it.

5.3 Exploring the local: One's own Chinese background

Some Chinese artists juxtapose their position with the West. Wang Guangyi calls himself an observer of "two civilizations, two worlds, clashing." [30] Yu Youhan divides Chinese and Western traditions: "Pop Art is like moving a Western tree to Chinese soil, like breeding a Western tree with a Chinese tree. I want to make art that is like a Chinese tree growing naturally from Chinese soil." [31] Xu Bing perceives a biased reception of his work in the West: "Americans are very interested in China, but they only see the political problems. We are always labeled Chinese first. People refer to our Chinese background, and are not particularly interested in what the art is about. They look only for the message they feel you must carry from China." [32]

This leads us to an exploration of the local. Chinese artists are not only aware of the West and their interaction with the West; they are also aware of their Chinese background. In the rhetoric of the artists' interviews, I often detected a culture-centered Sinocentric attitude. Artists like Feng Mengbo, Yu Youhan, and Song Haidong talk in terms as 'you/we' (*nimen/women*), 'yours/ours' (*nimende/womende*), 'Westerners/Chinese' (*xifangren/zhongguoren*). Yu Youhan said 'We Chinese are not like you Westerners' (*women zhongguoren he nimen xifangren bu yiyang*).

The statements below reveal how Chinese artists relate to their own culture in juxtaposition with the West. Some refer to their upbringing, education and the influence of their parents, or refer to a rootedness in Chinese history and philosophy. Some refer

to an explicit Chinese spiritual aspect. Others describe what they recognize as typical Chinese features of their artwork.

Xu Bing states that at present, Chinese culture is a multi-leveled and undefined cultural complex that offers a platform for future developments, but also claims: "Chinese culture is a fundamental part of my artistic voice. It is not something I emphasize or attempt to disguise. It exists in my consciousness and subconsciousness. It is an inalienable part of myself." [33] He confirms: "I have a Chinese cultural background. You never lose that. I will always be a Chinese artist, the concept of my art (*yishu guannian*) will always be Chinese, because that is the core of who I am and culture cannot be changed. I am deeply rooted in Chinese culture." [34] This Chinese background is partly related to his upbringing and he sees it as an opportunity to interact at global level: "Since I grew up in China and am involved in Chinese culture in a very deep way; what I do comes very naturally. I have no other choice but to draw from my own cultural tradition, which has been filtered through Mao's Cultural Revolution. I feel that to use Chinese cultural elements to address global issues, to participate in global cultural debates, is a positive development. The alternative pursued by others is to avoid using Chinese cultural elements to address larger issues. The problem with that is you're denying your own culture; you're abandoning something of yourself. Part of the international success of a *Book from the Sky* came precisely from the fact that it embodies a particularly Chinese approach to culture. The real problem is not what materials or cultural elements one uses, but the level of one's reflection." [35]

Yu Youhan states: "My art is Chinese because I am Chinese." [36] He continues: "My work reflects the people of China, their spirit, pursuits and longings in a critical moment of rapid change and transition." [37] He talks about the 'Han' as a distinguished group: "China is a big painting country. The Han are not good at singing, dancing, or sports. We should paint." [38] For Yu Youhan being Chinese implies a spiritual dimension: "I connect the techniques of modern Western art with the tradition of Chinese culture

(…) although my earlier works took into consideration the expression of the Chinese I did not succeed. Many found them too Western. What is this authentic Chinese consciousness? I think it is superficial to search for it only on a formal level. We have to draw on the spiritual aspects of culture." [39]

Song Haidong explains how he became acquainted with China's tradition via his parents: "I was heavily influenced by Chinese tradition, especially through my father. Every day after dinner he would read to us from Chinese classics such as *Shuihu zhuan, Xi you ji*, … My parents would often take us to the literati gardens and pavilions (*yuanlin*), or to temples to spend time there. I don't know if they were aware of it, but we absorbed a lot of traditional culture in that way." [40]

Sun Liang differentiates his art from Western art: "What I create is Chinese art. I think there is a big difference between Western and Chinese art. Once I remember talking to a foreign art specialist together with Li Xu. We came to the conclusion that our cultures are far apart from each other. The line and dragon veins are crucial in my work. I use these traditional techniques to create perspective. In Chinese art it must be possible to make a mental wandering through the painting. You know how long ancient handscrolls can be. They were always looked at on a table that was a bit longer than a meter. The viewer looked at it step by step. The painting did not stop at the frame; there was no border to it. There was no color in the landscape, only ink in various shades. Above all there was the use of nothingness or emptiness. The use of all these things makes my art Chinese." [41]

What Sun Liang describes are a number of techniques from traditional ink painting and calligraphy that dominate his artwork. He distinguishes Chinese art from Western art: "To Chinese artists the line is the best way to express emotions and feelings while to Western artists lines almost certainly provide the contours of support in paintings." [42] After a few decades of using oil paint, having been trained in the ink painting tradition, he has now returned to traditional techniques: "Since 2007, I returned to traditional

Chinese art. Throughout my career, even when I mainly created oil paintings, I continued to make works in ink now and again. But now I really want to create work in the *guohua* tradition. I want to return to my own culture. I want to return home. I started my artistic career with ink painting and now I've gone back to it." [43]

Liu Wei refers to Chinese aspects in his art: "Everybody can match up a bright color, but each color has its own visual effect, because bright color means different things to different people. Paintings are meant for their beholders, who will watch them with their own cultural understanding. I can only say that there is a bright color within everybody. My paintings can show you how I read it. You have a bright color in your mind too. How do you read it? If one of my paintings can read the bright color in your mind, then it is a good work. As for me, I am aware of the diversified colors and mixed feelings within myself. With these whirling emotions, you can't always read clearly. What I can do is present them as they are. For example, some colors in my mind might be nostalgic and of unique significance to me. They come from traditional Chinese culture, which has a profound influence on me, and traditional things are difficult for one to detach oneself from." [44] When appreciating Liu Wei's work, probably only a few art historians would make a link to traditional Chinese culture. At the beginning of his career, Liu Wei portrayed political figures in his work that where recognizably Chinese. The bulk of his work does not seem to have an immediate link with Chinese tradition. Still Liu Wei explicitly claims that his use of colors is Chinese.

Fang Lijun claims a rootedness in Chinese history: "It is said that modern art derives from the West, so we should keep up with them in forms, which is actually ridiculous. It's like a person who hears another's fart and keeps pondering on the fart itself, instead of thinking about its origins in belly. For me, China's modern art has fertile soil and excellent historical resources." [45]

Geng Jianyi: "What I learned from my parents is to always give the best part to others. But I don't know if that is a particularly Chinese thing. Of course I absorbed all kinds

of traditional influences. We practiced calligraphy, we went to visit Beilin in Xian, and other places with art from the Wei and Jin dynasty. And obviously we learned about Confucius. I see it more like tradition has influenced me as a human being and that comes out in my work." [46] He does not consider his art as necessarily Chinese.

Yu Hong describes the influence of traditional philosophies as something that all Chinese have in their head. For Yu Hong the Chinese mind searches for equilibrium between yin and yang like a *taiji* pattern.[47] This implies that what 'is' and what 'is not' becomes equally important. This means for example that the use of emptiness or nothingness becomes as important as what is depicted. Yu Hong often depicts people in her work against an empty background. Sun Liang's reference of nothingness and emptiness also fits into this context.

Zhang Peili's description of *A Gust of Wind* is a coexistence of destruction and construction. He also describes *taiji quan* or shadow boxing as typically Chinese: "In *A Gust of Wind*, the house was destroyed. The remains – both actual and on video – act as a focus for memory. Instinctively, human beings reconstruct the house and continue to seek a good life. It's like a circle. I don't believe in outright skepticism. If I did, there's nothing to be done. I think one can feel happiness even in damaged life circumstances. It's human nature to pursue the illusion of a good life (…) I'm not a specialist in Chinese culture or philosophy. I'm not a specialist in Western culture and philosophy either. Comparatively, I think Chinese philosophy is more stable – not like Western philosophy, which has evolved and changed radically over time. Also, Chinese philosophy emphasizes harmony and contentment, although it seems that Western philosophy and Chinese philosophy share certain similarities after postmodernism. Western philosophy still places greater emphasis on logic, reason, and analysis whereas Chinese philosophy emphasizes feeling, experience, and meditation. As a result, we have different views towards many things. It's just like a Westerner doing *taiji*: no matter how good this person is at carrying out the moves, it wouldn't seem

as natural compared to a Chinese person doing *taiji*. I don't know why it should be like that. I haven't thought consciously about my relationship to Chinese and Western cultures or philosophies, or how to find a connecting point between them. I sometimes try to avoid this question – whether I belong to Western or Chinese culture. I don't think it is necessary to draw a clear boundary. The creativity of my work is influenced by my personal surroundings: the people I meet and the books I read. The people and books are no longer what we see or read thousands of years ago or five hundred years ago or even two hundred years ago. I think my works have both Western and Chinese elements. And I don't like to be restricted purely as a Chinese and limited by my cultural characteristics. The best thing is to be natural and to be oneself. I think others have the right to judge my works from different cultural perspectives, but it is not something I myself should think about too much (…) Though I have been abroad often and have seen many artworks, I haven't really tried to compare and analyze artworks from the West with those in China. I personally think there are many Western works that emphasize harmony too. So I can't give a positive or negative answer to your question. I think Chinese artworks tend to be quite beautiful. However, whether the piece of work is beautiful or not is decided by each viewer's aesthetics or attitudes. Some Chinese artists also make very violent, unbearable works, but some people may still find harmony in this kind of work. I think in the end it really depends on how the individual viewer reads or interprets the work." [48]

Zhang Peili claims to recognize a local flavor in the art of other Chinese artists: "… generally speaking if we look at the work of a Chinese contemporary artist, you don't have to look at his name, you just have to look at the work to see it's from a Chinese artist. The kind of symbols (*fuhao*) in their works is obvious. You'll see this very often (…) It has no relation to his or her background or history [*guojia de yige beijing, wenhua fuhao*]. Speaking from both perspectives we're very different … the work of Chinese artists is easier for me to understand. I see it immediately." [49]

Nevertheless, Zhang Peili strongly reacts to the question about Chinese aspects in his art: “Why do I have to answer this question [if my art is Chinese]? We Chinese always have to motivate what we have from the West. A Western artist is never asked what he has from China. The fact that I have to answer this question is already a problem in itself. Why is this question raised? The Chinese often say my art is not Chinese. Westerners often say my art is not Western. I say my art is I. It reflects my attitude; it reflects who I am as an artist. It does not matter if an artist is Chinese or not. He has to be a good artist and that’s it. In the last 20 years, Chinese art has done well on the market, but Chinese art is really trapped in this problem of East-West categorizing.” [50]

It indeed seems true that Chinese art is trapped as Zhang Peili suggests. It is impossible to pinpoint what is ‘Chinese’, but the particular local conditions of China do play a role in the positioning of Chinese art. Even if in the 1930–1940s modernist experiments had some influence on Chinese culture, it was actually in the 1980s that both modernism and postmodernism were introduced simultaneously into China, at the same moment that the Chinese rediscovered their own traditions.

What the West easily recognizes as ‘Chinese’ are very common art forms like ink painting, calligraphy, woodcuts, paper cuts, Peking Opera, porcelain and popular icons like the phoenix and dragon, the Great Wall, and more recently Maoist and Cultural Revolution icons. What is more difficult to pinpoint is the immaterial aspect of what the artists address as ‘culture’, ‘cultural roots’ or ‘traditional aesthetics’. The Chinese aesthetic framework is connected with a traditional holistic view of life and of the universe. This stands in sharp contrast to Western theory, which is based on dualist thinking from Plato, over Christianity to Descartes. The so-called spiritual dimension of art, the cultivating of the mind through art, and the holistic aesthetic framework has existed for thousands of years. This aesthetic framework also exists in today’s China that is in interaction with global tendencies. China has modernized and this

modernization is built on a context that differs from the Western context. Therefore in the appreciation of Chinese art, China’s tradition cannot be ignored, even if much Chinese contemporary art ‘feels’ or ‘looks’ ‘Western’ or ‘global’.

5.4 Post-colonial: Reviving the local and taking a position

Since the 19th century the Chinese have been concerned with the idea of ‘saving the nation’ (*jiuguo*) or ‘revival of the nation’. Remarkably, contemporary artists still share this concern as Wang Guangyi states: “My feeling now is that when you look at an artist’s work, you are not only seeing part of his personal history, but also of a whole generation. This awareness may perhaps be the starting point for the revival of a nation and a people.” [51] Wang Guangyi explicitly states he wants to create art that can serve as a cultural legacy for future generations.

The concern with the Chinese nation exists not only on the level of the individual artist but also on an institutional level. *Portrait of the Times: 30 Years of Chinese Contemporary Art* discussed earlier was the first major ‘self-organized’ exhibition at the *Power Station of Art*. The exhibition introductory text clearly stated that the focus was on ‘the building of the nation’ by way of portraits. It meant to show ‘Chinese art’s modernization and contemporary art’s sinicization’. The exhibition was explicitly presented in a popular and easy to understand manner because ‘aesthetic education is an important index of citizen quality, even more the token of improvement of a nation’s civilization (…) important for the construction of contemporary urban culture.’ [52] Education, nation, construction and civilization are crucial words in the discourse. The exhibition had to show the audience ‘the changes in Chinese people’s images’ to enable the audience to perceive the vivid diversity of Chinese society, to exclaim over the vicissitudes of the times, and to further discern the source of strength of realizing the ‘Chinese Dream’. The ‘Chinese Dream’ set by president Xi Jinping is the goal to achieve and that should put all of China in one direction, including this exhibition.

Curator Li Xu confirms that it was ‘an academic exhibition adapted for the general public’, in other words for ‘the masses’, and rather than presenting an overview of the art of portraiture in China, it was ‘set up to a defined set of academic criteria’.[53] Maybe China has arrived at a stage beyond ‘saving the nation’ into ‘strengthening the nation’, or ‘reviving the nation’ and while many new artworks created over the past decades were highly controversial at the time of their creation, these same works and contemporary art in general has now become a tool in reaching that goal – set by politics. The Chinese artist has to find a way to deal with China’s tradition, with its politics, and finally also with the West.

In the work of the artists featured in this book, there seems to be a growing awareness of China’s art tradition and a growing use of traditional languages and methods. While during the 1980s all artists were actively part of the breaking away from China’s imposed art curriculum, later in their careers many of them have started to use an artistic language that is closer to China’s tradition, the result of an active search and local particularity. Some of them explicitly say they want to return to China’s own tradition and they value their own culture. The most extreme example of this is Song Haidong who turned away from the contemporary focus altogether in the 1990s. But also, Fang Lijun, Feng Mengbo, Liu Wei, Sun Liang, Xu Bing, Yu Hong and Yu Youhan have made a conscious decision to turn towards China’s art tradition in the last decade. Wang Guangyi confirms this: “My relationship with my own tradition has changed. When I was young, Western art had a huge influence on me. But as I matured I became more aware of the importance of my own cultural tradition.” [54] Wang Guangyi further argues: “Art should be built on our history and our culture.” [55]

Tradition is being absorbed into their work today. Instead of being cut off from it, China’s artistic legacy has become part of contemporary Chinese art. This raises not only the question as to whether it is possible to talk about ‘Chinese art’, but also whether it is possible to talk about ‘contemporary’ Chinese art.

In China, huge efforts have been put into the writing of China’s art history, especially developments of recent decades. An example is Lü Peng, *A History of Art in Twentieth-century China*, published by Peking University in 2006 in Mandarin, and in English by Charta in Milan in 2010. Nowadays, China describes the modernization of Chinese art in the context of the modernization of China in general. This raises the question as to why developments in contemporary Chinese art in recent decades have always been described against a background of the dominant Eurocentric art history canon. By doing so, the Chinese confirm the centralist notion of the Western-dominated canon. Has anyone described the developments in art of recent decades in China against a background of art history inspired by Chinese tradition?

In exhibitions, contemporary Chinese artwork is only exceptionally presented in connection with China’s aesthetic past. Examples are the *Entry Gate: Chinese Aesthetics of Heterogeneity* at MOCA Shanghai in 2006, which described the phenomenon of Chinese Neo-literati aesthetics, and the exhibition *New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond* at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2008.

As time passes, the concept of ‘contemporary’ becomes more and more vague and there is a growing trend for placing contemporary Chinese art in the context of Chinese aesthetics and presenting it as a natural continuation. An exhibition at the *Today Art Museum (Jinri Meishuguan)* in 2012 wrote one version of China’s art history. The exhibition focused partly on the artwork of Pang Gongkai and partly on his view about the state of Chinese art, which was also published in a catalog.[56] Pang Gongkai describes contemporary Chinese art as naturally following tradition. The road to modernity in Chinese art is presented along the road of China’s recent history, or art as just part of the modernization process. The Opium War of 1840, when China was ‘backward and beaten up’, is set as the starting point for China’s mutation towards modernity. This brings us back to the post-colonial context. The Chinese describe the modernization process in Chinese art (and in China generally) in terms of the confrontation with

foreign nations in past centuries. The titles of the various chapters of Pang Gongkai's work speak for themselves. 'Salvation and enlightenment' recounts evolutions in the period from the May Fourth Movement in 1919 to 1949. Mao Zedong's theory of art creation for the masses of workers, farmers, soldiers and intellectuals (four-isms) is presented as part of the modernization process. The individual has to make room for the collective during Mao's time. And finally contemporary Chinese art is presented as a continuation of these developments. Interestingly, the last chapter ends with the question: 'To follow or not to follow' the West, the problematic itself is a symptom of the modernity of Chinese art.

In the 1980s, tradition was often described as a burden, coinciding with the rhetoric of the series *Heshang*, but over time China has grown stronger, and tradition is being reevaluated in a positive way resulting in the often-heard propaganda-like dictum of 'Five thousand years of Chinese history' and pride in China's long tradition.

5.5 Curatorial practices in the West

In past decades, curatorial practices both inside and outside China have changed and Chinese art is more connected with the global art scene than ever before. Curatorial practices in the West with regard to exhibitions presenting only Chinese art should, however, be questioned because they often influence and perpetuate clichés. When Achilles Benito Oliva went to China in 1992 there was no private art market there. The Chinese were hardly aware of the commercial value of art. Westerner's 'discovery' of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s cemented Chinese artists in a position from which it is hard to escape. Today, exhibitions presenting art from China in the West are still presented as 'Chinese' art. This choice to separate the art of China from other art implies exotism and essentialism. Moreover, the artworks on show in the West often belong to the private collections of Westerners, resulting in the same artworks being in each exhibition, as if only a number of artworks have been created in China over the past decades. Eurocentric curatorship forces Chinese artists to negotiate their position

in relation to the global art scene. It is unlikely that many artists in the West even consider what the Chinese think about their work; but the Chinese are highly aware of the West and of the global position of Chinese art.

5.6 Conclusion

When China opened up in 1978, the country connected with the world and the local Chinese art scene started to connect with the global art scene. Chinese artists had to wait until the 1990s to be invited to the West. The awareness in China of China's tradition as a basis for contemporary Chinese art is growing, and the awareness of the strength of China in the world is growing. By now, many contemporary Chinese artists are part of the global art market, but a lot of work remains to be done before the Chinese art world is truly accepted as an equal partner and before power relations in the art world are balanced.

1 http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=96 (the full interview transcript is available in Mandarin. I translate what is relevant).

2 http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=96 (consulted 28/09/2011).

3 http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=27

4 Ding Yi, in Nuridsany, Ding Yi, 2004, p. 92.

5 Jeanne Boden's interview with Ding Yi, via email.

6 Interview with Ding Yi, 88-Mocca 2008, Bologna, January 2008 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7THUSRzs9k (Consulted 4/04/2011).

7 Ding Yi in Watkins, 2005, pp. 32–40.

8 http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview6 (the full interview transcript is available in Mandarin. I translate what is relevant).

9 Jeanne Boden's interview with Ding Yi, via email.

10 Jeanne Boden's interview with Ding Yi, via email.

11 Jeanne Boden's interview with Yu Youhan on July 28, 2011 close to his home in Zhaojiabang Lu, Shanghai.

12 Jeanne Boden's interview with Yu Youhan on July 28, 2011 close to his home in Zhaojiabang Lu, Shanghai.

13 Yu Youhan, in Noth Jochen. Pöhlman Wolfger, Kai Reschke, China Avant-Garde. Counter-currents in Art and culture, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 177.

14 Yu Youhan, in Yu Youhan, 2004 (no page numbers in catalog).

15 Zhang Pingjie, 2006, pp. 8–9.

16 Wang Guangyi in Henry, 1994, p 20.

17 Lü Peng 1992, 2, p 43.

18 Nuridsany, 2004, p 58.

19 Yan Shanchun, Smith, 2002, p 21.

20 Jeanne Boden's interview with Geng Jianyi on July 29, 2011 in Hangzhou close to the China Academy of Arts.

21 Geng Jianyi in Wang Luyan, 1994, pp. 13–14.

22 Jeanne Boden's interview with Wang Ziwei on July 30, 2011 close to his home in Hengshan Lu, Shanghai.

23 Jeanne Boden's interview with Yu Hong on July 31, 2011 at her studio in 798 Art Zone, Beijing.

24 Shi Jian, 2010, p 52.

25 Yu Hong in Shi Jian, 2010, p 118.

26 Jeanne Boden's interview with Zhang Peili on July 29, 2011 in Hangzhou close to the China Academy of Arts.

27 Jeanne Boden's interview with Zhang Peili on July 29, 2011 in Hangzhou close to the China Academy of Arts.

28 Jeanne Boden's interview with Zhang Peili on July 29, 2011 in Hangzhou close to the China Academy of Arts.

29 Hou Hanru in Bonami 2003, p 188.

30 Wang Guangyi in Nuridsany, 2004, p 54.

31 Yu Youhan, in Yu Youhan, 2004 (no page numbers in catalog).

32 Xu Bing, Smith, 1993, p 45.

33 Xu Bing in Yishu. 2002, Vol 1 No 1, p 15.

34 Jeanne Boden's interview with Xu Bing, 2011, CAFA, Beijing.

35 Xu Bing in Kesner, 2000, p 54.

36 Jeanne Boden's interview with Yu Youhan on July 28, 2011, Shanghai.

37 Barmé, 1999, p 232.

38 Yu Youhan, in Yu Youhan 2004 (no page numbers in catalog).

39 Yu Youhan, in Noth, Pöhlman, Kai, 1993, p 177.

40 Jeanne Boden's interview with Song Haidong on July 28, 2011 in Jingshajiang Lu, close to his home, Shanghai.

41 Jeanne Boden's interview with Sun Liang, 2011, Shanghai.

42 Jeanne Boden's interview with Sun Liang, 2011, Shanghai.

43 Jeanne Boden's interview with Sun Liang, 2011, Shanghai.

44 Zi Liang, Ni Youyu, Chen Tingting, 2009, p 9.

45 Jose, 1997, pp. 93–94.

46 Jeanne Boden's interview with Geng Jianyi, 2011, Hangzhou.

47 Jeanne Boden's interview with Yu Hong on July 31, 2011, Beijing.

48 Zhang Peili in Gladston, 2009, pp. 52–58.

49 Zhang Peili in V2 on *Lowest Resolution* (DEAF 2007) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-NYL3aK5zQ&feature=related (consulted 4/04/2011).

50 Jeanne Boden's interview with Zhang Peili, 2011, Hangzhou.

51 Wang Guangyi, *Issues about Art, Guanyu yishu wenti* in Chang, Huang, Wang, Yan, 2004, pp. 4–5.

52 Hu Jinjun, in Li Xu, 2013, p 3.

53 Li Xu, 2013, pp. 18–19.

54 Jeanne Boden's interview with Wang Guangyi, 2011, Beijing.

55 http://www.artzinechina.com/display.php?a=72&lang=en (consulted 17/07/2011).

56 Pan Gongkai, 2012.

Wang Ziwei, *Mao Zedong with Moustache*, 2010, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm ▶
© Courtesy of Wang Ziwei

This book contextualizes the complexity of contemporary Chinese art. Contemporary art from China takes place in a context in which various tensions are simultaneously at play.

Chinese art needs to find its position between China and the West, or gain its rightful position in the global art world. It also needs to find equilibrium between China's tradition and innovation. Some people question the 'contemporaneity' of Chinese art, seeing it as a continuation of an ancient aesthetic framework. Chinese artists continue to negotiate their position between individual artistic freedom and policy dictated by the one-party state. These tensions have dominated art in China since the Opium War, throughout the 20th century, and they continue to exist today.

The relationship of many Mainland Chinese artists (except a limited number who have earned international renown) with the international art scene continues to be charged with emotion and even frustration, arising from the fact that Chinese art is still often internationally considered as 'ethnic', 'mystic', 'exotic' or 'group-oriented'.

Xu Bing calls the way China and the West look at each other a habit. Zhang Peili sees inequality of politics and economics between China and the West as a major cause of the inequality in dialogue on art, as well as the continuing fundamental ignorance about China and Chinese culture and art in the West. Already when he was young Zhang Peili sharply addressed this problem in his article *In War with the West*: "The problem is that it is not easy for people in the West to know China (…) we must conclude that the different working attitudes of Western and Chinese artists are due to their different status and environmental conditions. Just as the Chinese have a misunderstanding of the West, so Western people are neither objective nor accurate when they look at China. People who live in countries at the 'center' contradict themselves with their own values when faced with cultures on the 'periphery'. This is manifested in certain double standards. Usually, Western people oppose having fixed concepts of culture and history, yet are certain that Western history is a history of development. Separated

from their own culture they become shaky in their faith. Many Westerners approach Chinese culture on a hunt for novelty and pleasure, regarding Chinese culture and history as fixed, congealed in antiquity, and at the same time they hope it will remain this way. In this regard they are like those Chinese who wish to return to the way of the ancients. There are also some Westerners who inject their interest in China's political and social problems into academic discussions. Although not malicious, such attitudes arise from an inequality in dialogue. Of course, it is not easy for the West to overcome misunderstandings because misunderstandings are intertwined with history, culture, perspectives, and points of view. Resolving them depends upon dialogue and exchange as well as the attitude taken towards such exchange and dialogue. Undoubtedly the inequality of political and economic levels is a major cause of such misunderstandings. How should the dialogue be conducted prior to the elimination of inequality? Avant-garde art (…) once served as a sign marking the beginning of the march of Chinese art towards freedom. Today it has shifted its combat target from the Chinese government to the West. Old obstacles have been cleared away; what will the new ones be? From whence will they come? So many artists accepted the language of Western art at that time, but what drove them to do so? What should we do today in the name of avant-garde? Strive to be champions for the honor of our country? Or triumph over the West completely so as to render it docile and obedient to us?"[1]

Maybe the most important remark in Zhang Peili's text is that Chinese artists had to break away from politics first after China opened up, but then ended up in a position between China and the West, in the post-colonial grip.

The lack of equal dialogue is not only clear on the level of the individual artist, but also on a more structural level. The global art canon is still very much Western-dominated. Globally, the curriculum in art schools often focuses on a Western dominant canon only. Chinese art or even Asian art, African art and many others are hardly mentioned and if so, only on the margins. They are in no way integrated into global art history. Despite

a number of efforts in the last decades and the general move toward global curatorial practices, non-Western art is still treated as exotic. Few people in the West seem to take note of this. People in power in the Western art world often claim they are aware of this problem, but practices of exhibiting and art criticism contradicts that awareness, or at least taking measures to solve the problem.

After spending many years of my life examining the problem of Eurocentrism in dealing with China and exploring the post-colonial condition of Chinese art I cannot help but finding it highly disturbing that bookshops in huge museums in the West such as Tate Modern in London or Centre Pompidou in Paris hardly have anything at all on Chinese art. The reasons probably lie both in China and in the West.

As China takes its position in the world, its aesthetic tradition should be recognized, traditional and contemporary.

But China and Chinese art is not only trapped in between the West and China. It is also searching for a balance between tradition and innovation. Alice Yang aptly formulates China's search for balance between tradition and modernization in her comments on Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*: "While it speaks in a national syntax, it disarticulates such syntax and renders it completely garbled. While it constructs a symbolic national text, it evacuated all meaning from such a text. In this way the work calls attention to the ongoing crisis of modern China and at the same time calls into question any easy resolution of such a crisis which might be afforded by simple allegiance to culture and tradition." [2]

You Youhan shares his view on China's position: "Chinese society is too biased at this moment. Maybe in 100 or 200 years it will be fine again, but we need to develop a long-term attitude again. You (*nimen*) [the West] woke us up with the Opium War, but now that we are awake we do not know which way to go." [3]

China has become stronger, finding its own way, partly connecting to the West and

partly walking its own path. A lot can still be learned from each other and it remains to be seen whether the two different social and political models can coexist in the field of art or have a common goal for art. Artists will develop into a global system on an individual level. The rest is politics.

This book has become my personal *Book from the Sky*. Like Xu Bing, I spent years of my life in the quietness of my office. Now it is time to give this book to the public. I hope it will contribute to a better understanding of the context of Chinese contemporary art, in all its complexity and beauty.

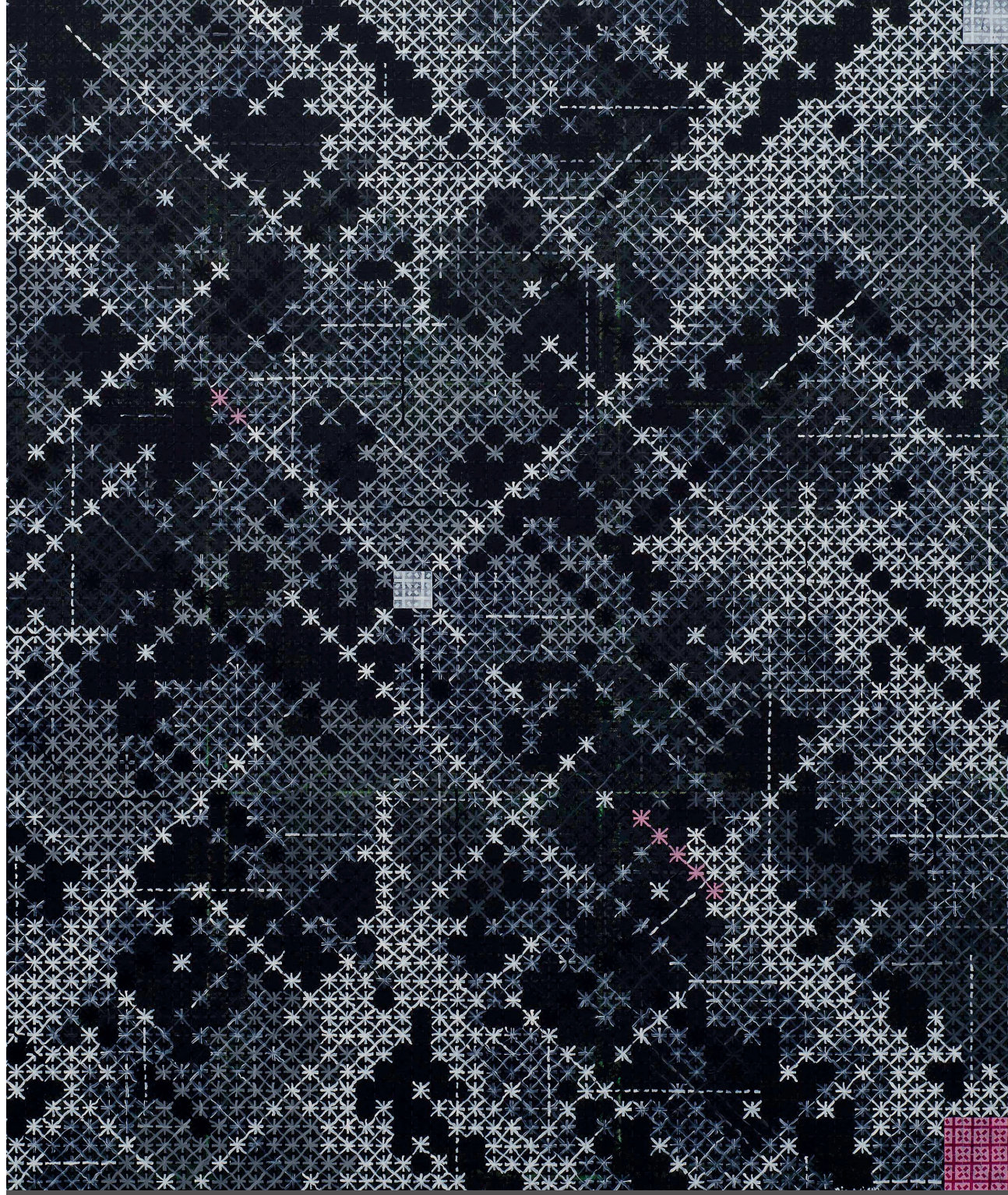
Jeanne Boden

Beijing, December 2014

1 Zhang Peili "In War with the West?/*Yu xifang zuozhan*" in: Van Dijk, 1996, pp. 133–135 originally published in Jiangsu huakan, 1996.6, pp. 18–21.

2 Yang, 1998, pp. 25–26.

3 Jeanne Boden's interview with Yu Youhan, 2011, Shanghai.



Ding Yi, *Appearances of Crosses*, 2012-2, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200cm ▶
© Courtesy of Ding Yi and ShanghArt Gallery

1. Glossary of Chinese titles in pinyin and characters

Biaoge he zhengshu	表格和证书
Changshu de Mao Zedong 5 hao	长须的毛泽东5号
Da pipan: Wang Guangyi	大批判：王广义
Dongfeng – Jinlong	东风金龙
Gui da qiang	鬼打墙
Hepi shu yihao	褐皮书一号
Hou gudian – Mala zhi si A	后古典——马拉之死A
Kejian de richang yinghua	可见的日常影画
Liuchu de lian	流出的脸
Luanma shanshui	乱码山水
Muji chengzhang xilie	目击成长系列
Muke banhua	木刻版画
Shishi	示十
Shui – Cihai biaozhun ban	水—辞海标准版
Siren zhaoxiang bu	私人照相簿
Sumiao (zhi liu)	素描 (之六)
Tian	田
Tianshu1988	天书
Tianti	天梯
Ticao jiaolian	体操教练
“Wei” zi 3 hao	‘卫’字3号
Wenbie	吻别
Wenhua dongwu	文化动物
Wenshen yueliang	纹身月亮
Women re ai da ziran	我们热爱大自然
Wuti	无题
Wuwang	无望
Xilie er (zhi shi)	系列二（之十）
Xin yingwen shufa	新英文书法
Xing yu chang	形与场
Yanzhi xilie 9 hao	胭脂系列9号
Yige zhuanhuan anli de yanjiu	一个转换案例的研究
Yongfang guangmang	永放光芒
Youguang	幽光
Yuedu 06	阅读06
Zhiqu Doom Shan	智取Doom山

2. Glossary of Chinese names in pinyin and characters

Ai Weiwei	艾未未	Bada Shanren	八大山人
Bao Zunxin	包尊信	Bo Yang	柏杨
Cai Guoqiang	蔡国强	Cai Jin	蔡锦
Cai Yuanpei	蔡元培	Cang Jie	仓颉
Chen Danqing	陈丹青	Chen Duxiu	陈独秀
Chen Kaige	陈凯歌	Chen Rongyi	陈荣义
Chen Shumei	陈书梅	Chen Yifei	陈逸飞
Chen Yuan	陈瑗	Chen Zhen	陈箴
Cheng Conglin	程丛林	Deng Xiaoping	邓小平
Ding Fang	丁方	Ding Rong	丁荣
Ding Yanyong	丁衍庸	Ding Yi	丁乙
Dong Qichang	董其昌	Fan Kuan	范宽
Fang Lijun	方力钧	Fang Sicong	方思聪
Fang Zengxian	方增先	Fei Dawei	费大为
Feng Mengbo	冯梦波	Fu Baoshi	傅抱石
Gao Jianfu	高剑父	Gao Minglu	高名潞
Gao Xingjian	高行健	Geng Jianyi	耿建翌
Gong Jianqing	龚建庆	Gong Yan	龚彦
Gu Dexin	顾德新	Gu Wenda	谷文大
Gu Yuan	古元	Guan Liang	关良
Guan Shanyue	关山月	Guan Yuda	管郁达
Guan Zilan	关紫兰	Guo Tong	郭彤
Guo Xi	郭熙	Hanshan	寒山
He Rong	何溶	He Xin	何新
Hou Hanru	候瀚如	Hu Jieming	胡介鸣
Hu Shi	胡适	Hu Yaobang	胡耀邦
Hua Guofeng	华国锋	Huanzhu Louzhu (Li Shanji)	还珠楼主 (李善基)
Huang Rui	黄锐	Huang Yongping	黄永砯
Huang Zhuan	黄专	Jia Youfu	賈又福
Jiang Feng	江丰		
Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek)		蒋介石	
Jiang Mei	江梅	Jiang Zemin	江泽民
Jin Guantao	金观涛	Kang Xi	康熙
Kang Youwei	康有为	Li An (Ang Lee)	李安
Li Bai	李白	Li Hua	李桦
Li Huasheng	李华生	Li Luming	李路明

Li Shan	李山	Li Shan (No Name Group)	李珊
Li Shangyin	李商隐	Li Shuang	李爽
Li Xianting	栗宪庭	Li Xiaoshan	李小山
Li Xu	李旭	Li Yongcun (Boyun)	李永存
Li Zehou	李泽厚	Li Zhenhua	李振华
Li Zuming	李祖明	Liang Qichao	梁启超
Liang Shuming	梁漱溟	Lin Biao	林彪
Lin Fengmian	林风眠	Lin Yilin	林一林
Lin Yutang	林语堂	Liu Gongquan	柳公权
Liu Haili	刘海栗	Liu Haisu	刘海粟
Liu Ling	刘玲	Liu Shi	柳湜
Liu Wei	刘炜	Liu Xiaodong	刘小东
Liu Xun	刘迅	Liu Yan	刘彦
Lu Hao	卢昊	Lü Peng	吕澎
Lu Rongzhi	陆蓉之	Lu Xun	鲁迅
Lu Zhirong (Rong Rong)	卢志荣	Luo Zhongli	罗中立
Ma Desheng	马德升	Ma Jianzhong	马建忠
Ma Kelu	马可鲁	Ma Yuan	马原
Mao Lizi	毛栗子	Mao Shibo	毛士博
Mao Xuhui	毛旭辉	Mao Zedong	毛泽东
Mei Lanfang	梅兰芳	Meng Haoran	孟浩然
Min Xiwen	闵希文	Mi Fu	米芾
Ni Haifeng	倪海峰	Ni Youyu	倪有鱼
Pan Dehai	潘德海	Pan Gongkai	潘公凯
Pan Xinglei	潘星磊	Ouyang Xun	欧阳询
Qi Baishi	齐白石	Qian Juntao	钱君陶
Qin Yifeng	秦一峰	Qiu Di	丘堤
Qiu Zhijie	丘志杰	Qu Leilei	曲磊磊
Ren Jian	任戬	Ruan Ji	阮籍
Shao Fei	邵飞	Shen Fan	申凡
Shen Kua	沈括	Sheng Ning	盛宁
Shitao	石涛	Shi Xixi	史习习
Shide	拾得	Shu Kewen	舒可文
Sima Guang	司马光	Song Haidong	宋海东
Shuang Mu	双木	Su Dongpo	苏东坡
Su Tong	苏童	Su Xiaokang	苏晓康
Sun Liang	孙良	Sun Yuesheng	孙越生
Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen)	孙中山		
Tang Song	唐宋	Tang Wuzong	唐武宗
Tian Shuying	田淑英	Wan Yining	厉以宁
Wang Aihe	王爱和	Wang Gongxin	王功新
Wang Guangyi	王广义	Wang Shigu (Wang Hui)	王石谷
Wang Jianwei	汪建伟	Wang Jiaxin	王家新
Wang Jian	王鉴	Wang Jinsong	王劲松
Wang Keping	王克平	Wang Lin	王林
Wang Luxiang	王鲁湘	Wang Mengqi	王孟奇
Wang Qiang	王强	Wang Shuo	王朔
Wang Tiande	王天德	Wang Tianwen	王天文
Wang Wei	王伟	Wang Xiaoshuai	王小帅
Wang Yongsheng	王友身	Wang Yuanqi	王原祁
Wang Ximeng	王希孟	Wang Xizhi	王羲之
Wang Youshen	王由身	Wang Zhihuan	王之涣
Wang Ziwei	王子卫	Wei Bin	尉彬
Wei Hai	韦海	Wen Bao	温葆
Wen Zhengming	文徵明	Wu Dayu	吴大羽
Wu Guanzhong	吴冠忠	Wu Hung	巫鸿
Wu Liang	吴亮	Wu Shanzhuan	吴山专
Xi Chuan	西川	Xia Jun	夏骏
Xiao Haichun	萧海春	Xiao Lu	肖鲁
Xiao Quan	肖全	Xie He	谢赫
Xu Beihong	徐背鸿	Xu Bing	徐冰
Xu Lei	徐累	Xu Shen	许慎
Xu Shucheng	徐书城	Xu Wei	徐渭
Yan Li	严力	Yan Peiming	严培明
Yan Zhenqing	颜真卿	Yang Aiqi	杨蔼琪
Yang Hui	杨辉	Yang Jiechang	杨诘苍
Yang Guangming	杨光明	Yang Wei	杨卫
Yang Yiping	杨益平	Yang Yushu	杨雨澍
Yang Zirong	杨子荣	Yang Zhenzhong	杨振中
Ye Yongqing	叶永青	Yi Dan	易丹
Yu Hong	喻红	Yu Youhan	余友涵
Yun Nantian	恽南田	Zeng Fanzhi	曾梵志
Zeng Xiaojun	曾小俊	Zhai Mo	翟墨
Zhang Ailing	张爱玲	Zhang Daqian	张大千

Zhang Guoliang	张国梁	Zhang Hongtu	张宏图
Zhang Huan	张洹		
Zhang Songren (Chang Tsong-zung)		张颂仁	
Zhang Tiemei	张铁梅	Zhang Peili	张培力
Zhang Qian	张骞	Zhang Wei	张巍
Zhang Xiaogang	张晓刚	Zhang Xu	张旭
Zhang Xudong	张旭东	Zhang Yanyuan	张彦远
Zhang Yimou	张艺谋	Zhang Zhaohui	张朝晖
Zhao Bandi	赵半狄	Zhao Jianren	赵健人
Zhao Li	赵力	Zhao Mengfu	赵孟頫
Zhao Wenliang	赵文量	Zhao Wuji	赵无极
Zhao Ziyang	赵紫阳	Zheng Ziyan	郑子燕
Zhong Acheng	钟啊城	Zhou Changjiang	周长江
Zhou Enlai	周恩来	Zhou Tiehai	周铁海
Zhou Zuoren	周作人	Zhu De	朱德
Zhu Dequn	朱德群	Zhu Qi	朱其
Zhu Qingsheng	朱青生	Zhu Xiaowen	朱晓闻
Zhao Yuanren (Y.R. Chao)	赵元任		

3. Glossary of Chinese terms in pinyin and characters

798 Yishu qu	798 艺术区
Ba wu' meishu xinchao de shenhua yu yaomohua	八五– 美术新潮的神化与妖魔化
Bainian guochi	百年国耻
Bai pi shu	白皮书
Beifang qunti	北方群体
Beifang wenming	北方文明
Beifang wenxue yishu xinxi jiaoliu zhongxin	北方文学艺术信息交流中心
Beifang yishu qunti	北方艺术群体
Beijing qingnianbao	北京青年報
Bi fa ji	笔法记
Cao cao huashe	草草画社
Chan	禅
Chao	超
Chao shinian	超视念
Chaoyue	超越
Chaoji yishu	超级艺术
Chi she	池社
Chou er you xiang	抽而有象
Ci zhimin	次殖民
Cun	皴
Cunfa	皴法
Dangdai yishu de guojihua zhi lu: hou zhimin shengchan yu pentuhua	当代艺术的国际化之路: 后殖民生产与本土化
Dao	道
Dazhan	大展
Dazui xia	大醉侠
Dongcun	东村
Dongfang zhi lu	东方之路
Duli zezhanren	独立策展人
Dushure	读书热
Erhu	二胡
Faguo nongcun fengjing huazhanlan	法国农村风景画展览
Fan yishu huodong	反艺术活动
Fei qunti	非群体
Fuhao	符号
Fuqin	父亲

Gao Minglu xiandangdai yishu yanjiu zhongxin	高名潞现当代艺术研究中心
Gu hua pin lu	古画品论
Guanshi duhua	观诗读画
Guanyu yishu wenti	关与艺术问题
Gui da qiang	鬼打墙
Guofeng	国风
Guohua	国画
Guojia de yige beijing, wenhua fuhao	国家的一个背景, 文化符号
Guoqing	国情
Handai wenhua	寒带文化
Hei pi shu	黑皮书
Heshang	河殇
Hong Lou Meng	红楼梦
Hong taiyang xia de rizi	红太阳下的日子
Hongse: Lü	红色: 旅
Hou Yi she ri	后羿射日
Hou yishu zhong de wuliaogan he jiegou yishi zhuyi: wanshixieshi zhuyi yu zhengzhi popu chaoliuxi	后艺术中的无聊感和解构意识主义: 玩世现实主义与政治泼普潮流析
Huai Nan Zi	淮南子
Huajia	画家
Huang pi shu	黄皮书
Hui pi shu	灰皮书
Jiangsu Huakan	江苏画刊
Jiaoshi feng	矫饰风
Jidu hanleng	极度寒冷
Jie Shui	借水
Jieziyuan Huazhuan	芥子园画传
Jin ri meishu	今日美术
Jinri Meishuguan	今日美术馆
Jintian	今天
Jiuguo	救国
Junzi	君子
Li dai ming hua ji	历代名画记
Lixing huihua	理性回话
Liu fa	六法
Liu yao	六要

Liumang	流氓
Longmenke zhan	龙门客栈
Lunshuo zhongguo lunshuo ouzhou	论说中国论说欧洲
Mashi wentong	马师文通
Maore	毛热
Meiyou shinian	没有视念
Meiguo zhong Zhongguoxue shouce	美国中中国学手册
Meishu	美术
Meishu Congkan	美术丛刊
Meishu Sichao	美术思潮
Meishu Yanjiu	美术研究
Menglongshi	朦胧诗
Mengxi bitan	梦溪笔谈
Ming bao yuekan	明报月刊
Minquan zhuyi	民权主义
Minsheng zhuyi	民生主义
Minzu zhuyi	民族主义
Moganshanlu	莫干山路
Mu Lin Sen	木林森
Nianzhu yu bichu	念珠喻笔触
Nimen/women	你们/我们
Nimende/womende	你们的/我们的
Niu gui she shen	牛鬼蛇神
Nüshu	女书
Nüwa	女娲
Ouzhou zhongxin	欧洲中心
Penjing	盆景
Pi guo chun qiu	皮裹春秋
Piying	皮影
Qi yun	气韵
Qigong	气功
Qilai	起来
Qizhi jihua: yishu wei renmin fuwu	旗帜计划：艺术为人民服务
Qianwei	前卫
Qianweibei	前卫杯
Xiandai yishujia jianming da jiangsai huodong jihua	现代艺术家签名大奖赛活动计划
Rendan pian	仁丹篇

Rentong haishi xugou? Jiegou, jiegoude Zhongguo meng zai pouxi	“认同”还是虚构? 结构, 解构的中国梦再剖析
Ruanduan	软缎
San Guo	三国
Sanmin zhuyi	三民主义
Shang you zhengce, xia you duice	上有政策下有对策
Shanghai dangdai yishu bowuguan	上海当代艺术博物馆
Shanghai meishuguan	上海美术馆
Shanghen	伤痕
Shanghen huihua	伤痕绘画
Shengming zhiliu	生命支流
Shi er ren zhan	十二人展
Shishuo xinyu	世说新语
Shishi	十示
Shiji chuban jituan, Shanghai renmin chubanshe	世纪出版集团, 上海人民出版社
Shijie meishu	世界美术
Shijue yishu	视觉艺术
Shijue yu tuxiang yanjiu zhongxin	视觉与图像研究中心
Shilun Zhongguo gudian de chouxiang shenmei yishi	试论中国古典绘画的抽象审美意识
Shiyan yishu	试验艺术
Si hua: guan huan, da hua, kong hua, fei hua	四话: 官话, 大话, 空话, 废话
Shuihu Zhuan	水浒传
Shuowen jiezi	说文解字
Songzhuang	宋庄
Taiji	太极
Taiji quan	太极拳
Tan wo de ji zhang hua	谈我的几张画
Taolun Zhongguo gudian de chouxiang shenmei yishi	试论中国古典绘画的抽象审美意识
Tianmu	天幕
Tian Shu	天书
Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe	外语教学与研究出版社
Wanshi xianshi zhuyi	玩世现实主义
Weimei zhuyi	唯美主义
Weizi 3 hao	卫字3号
Weiwu zhuyi	唯物主義
Weixin zhuyi	唯心主義
Wenhuare	文化热

Wenming	文明
Wo guo chuantong yishu zhong chouxiang yinsu chutan	我国传统艺术中抽象因素初探
Women zhei yi dai	我们这一代
Women Zhongguoren he nimen xifangren bu yiyang	我们中国人和你们西方人不一样
Wu guo yu wu min	吾国与吾民
Wu ming	无名
Wuxia	武侠
Wu Zhi	无知
Xi wen le jian	喜闻乐见
Xiangtu ziran zhuyi	乡土自然主义
Xieyi	写意
Xifangren/Zhongguoren	西方人/中国人
Xi you ji	西游记
Xiao, ku, jiu	小哭旧
Xiandai	现代
Xiandai Huihua Jianshi	现代绘画简史
Xianfeng	先锋
Xiang Shijie	向世界
Xinchao dang’an	新潮档按
Xin Kongjian	新空间
Xin chao meishu lun gang	“新潮”美术论纲
Xin Meishu	新美术
Xin qingnian	新青年
Xin wenhua yundong	新文化运动
Xin xifang zhuyi	新西方主义
Xing’ershang de yishu	形儿上的艺术
Xingxing	星星
Xingyun de Fang Lijun you tade liyou	幸运的方力钧有他的理由
Yangshi taiji	杨氏太极
Yao yishu ziyou	要艺术自由
Ye tan chouxiang mei	也谈抽象美
Yi meng shan	沂蒙山
Yibu yichi	一步一尺
Yijing	易经
Yin yang	阴阳
Yishu guannian	艺术观念

Yishu Shijie	艺术世界
Yishu	艺术
Yi zhong wenhua de wutuobang	一种文化的乌托邦
Youhua yishu taolunhui	油画艺术讨论会
You Yin Cao	游阴曹
Yu waijie de chenshi xiangsi	与外界的尘世相似
Yu xifang zuozhan	与西方作战
Yuanlin	园林
Yuanmingyuan	圆明园
Za tan huihua zhong de chouxiang	杂谈绘画中的抽象
Zhengzhi popu	政治破普
Zhongguo de wenhua chongtu	中国的文化冲突
Zhongguo hen weida	中国很伟大
Zhongguo meishu bao	中国美书报
Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan	中国社会科学院
Zhongguo qianwei yishuzhan	中国前卫艺术展
Zhongguo xiandai meishu zhi lu tujian	中国现代美术之路图鉴
Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi	中国现代艺术史
Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan	中国现代艺术展
Zhongguo youhua	中国油画
Zhongguode	中国的
Zhongguoxing	中国性
Zhonghua yishu	中华艺术
Zhonghua yishu guan	中华艺术馆
Zhu pu tu	主仆图
Ziqiang yundong	自强运动

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Contemporary Chinese Art

Post-socialist, Post-traditional, Post-colonial

In the early 1990s artist Xu Bing stamped two pigs with respectively nonsensical Latin words and fake Chinese characters and allowed them to mate in an art gallery. The performance of 'two creatures, devoid of human consciousness, yet carrying on their bodies the marks of human civilization', engaging in the 'most primal form of social intercourse' confronted the public with the tension between nature and civilization. The work also addresses the tension between China and the West and therefore perfectly fits the core message of this book.

Contemporary art in China takes place in a post-socialist (post-Mao) context, and at the same time a post-traditional one, searching for balance between aesthetic legacy and modernization. It also tries to find its position in the post-colonial globalized arena.

This book explores the tension between individual artistic freedom and a dominant discourse of central Chinese government, between China's cultural legacy and modernization, and between China and a global art world still dominated by a Western canon. As a case study it focuses on the artists who participated in the Venice Biennale in 1993, which was the first time contemporary art from mainland China was structurally invited to participate in a global art context.

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Cover picture: Xu Bing, *A Case Study of Transference*, 1993–1994