

Admonition and the Academy:  
Installation, Video, and Performance Art in Reform Era China

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By  
Karin Grace Oen

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## **Abstract**

China's Reform Era (1978-present) has seen the reinvigoration of academic, and artistic practice, and a rapprochement between the Chinese Communist Party and the intellectual elite. At its beginnings in the early- to mid-1980s the new availability of foreign texts and media led to Culture Fever, a widespread phenomenon throughout the intellectual and artistic spheres characterized by enthusiasm for the philosophy, literature, and art of the West and pre-Communist China and the simultaneous uptake of discrete Western and Confucian philosophies. These discussions often addressed modernity and modernism in China, a crucial homology to early twentieth century Chinese negotiations in literature and the arts and the development of an amalgamated "Chinese modernism" comprised of elements of both Confucian and Western philosophy and aesthetics.

As this dissertation argues, key early experimental works of the Reform Era by Zhang Peili, Wu Shanzhuan, and Zhang Huan reveal a proclivity for subtle and indirect admonitory messages about China's socio-political climate – a contemporary inhabitation of the traditional elite scholar-artist and his obligation to criticize immoral or unjust policies or actions. This admonitory practice was built by artists educated in elite academies (specifically, the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou) yet utilized completely new and non-academic media. What this thesis terms as an "art of admonition" utilized traditional tropes, including direct remonstrations of officials, withdrawal from official life in protest, and the concept of the "middle hermit" – a scholar who admonishes official policy subtly and indirectly.

The experimental practices of artists after their graduation from elite academies stemmed from the extra-curricular resources made available to them, especially the schools' libraries. The connection of these unofficial works to the official academies, their validation by art market success, and the subsequent official endorsement accorded to these and other artists in the later Reform Era blurs the distinctions between official and unofficial artistic practice in China, suggesting a strong endorsement of the dissident artist's role as "middle hermit."

Thesis Supervisor: Caroline A. Jones  
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## **Preface**

As with many scholarly works that deal with Chinese people, places, concepts, and Chinese language materials, this dissertation employs romanization with some inconsistencies. In general I have implemented the Hanyu Pinyin romanization system. Exceptions occur in the cases of some place names, personal names (especially of historical figures), and certain nouns that are recognizable in English in their older romanized forms, for example “tai chi” instead of “*taiji*” and “Confucius” instead of “Kong Fuzi.” I have endeavored to refer to scholars and artists with Chinese names per their own convention, with many following the Chinese order that places the family name before the personal name, but some following the Western order that places the family name last. I have provided the Chinese characters at the initial mention of important translated concepts and Chinese language publication titles for reference purposes.

KGO

## Acknowledgements

My interest in modern and contemporary Chinese art pre-dates this dissertation, but the form that this interest has taken is the result of the rich academic environment at MIT's History, Theory, and Criticism (HTC) section of the Department of Architecture. I would particularly like to thank my intrepid advisor, Caroline A. Jones, whose questions, challenges, and comments have pushed my work into unexpected and fruitful directions, and whose unwavering support has been an invaluable asset throughout my time at HTC. I owe special thanks to Qianshen Bai, a dedicated committee member who has helped form my understanding of the relationship between Chinese art and history whose insights first helped me to articulate the theme of admonition as an important component of Reform Era art. Thanks also to Arindam Dutta for his kind support and his help in shaping my particular take on examining institutions and the individuals that shape them.

The faculty at HTC have provided intellectual leadership while forming a kind and dedicated community of scholars, and I thank them all, particularly Nasser Rabbat, Mark Jarzombek, David Friedman, Kristel Smentek, and Erika Naginski. The students at HTC are a formidable cohort, and it has been a pleasure learning from and with them over the years. Jordan Kauffman, Ben Matteson, Christian Hedrick, and Razan Francis have been especially integral to the completion of this work. My "elders," including John López, Fabiola López-Duran, Michael Osman, Winnie Wong, and Azra Aksamija have been extremely helpful as I charted my path through the dissertation process, as have my contemporaries: Anneka Lenssen, Iris Moon, Rebecca Uchill, Ana María León, Nicola Pezolet, Alla Vronskaya, Deniz Turker, Ila Sheren, Shiben Banerji, Sebastian Schmidt, Michael Kubo, Niko Vicario and Igor Demchenko. Special thanks also to Stephanie Tuerk for our valuable and productive epistemological discussions. All the work at HTC is done with the support of Kate Brearley, Anne Deveau, and Renée Caso, and to them I offer my sincere gratitude. Outside of HTC, I have benefited from the support of many dedicated scholars, including Cole Roskam, Midori Oka, Ray Williams, and Ding Yuhua.

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Boston, August, 2012

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## Chapter 1

### The Reform Era, the Market, and the Cultural Antecedents of Admonition

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#### **Art by the numbers: early experimental installation, video, and performance art in the Reform Era**

Wu Shanzhuan's installation entitled *75% Red, 20% White, 5% Black*<sup>1</sup> (1985), Zhang Peili's video entitled *30x30* (1988), and Zhang Huan's performance entitled *12 Square Meters* (1994) are all examples of artistic experimentation with non-traditional media in the years immediately preceding and following the crackdown on student protests in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Intriguingly, each artist chose non-descriptive, cryptic, mathematical titles to enforce an abstract and conceptual vocabulary on their otherwise highly various projects. For Wu, installation was the chosen medium: in a large room of a defunct Buddhist temple, large, square, red painted canvases bearing images of bold, black characters of various sizes and the yin-yang symbol in black and white were casually propped up against the walls with painted circular medallions arranged on the floor. For Zhang Peili, it was video: a painfully long, continuous shot that was edited to appear to last for the entire length of the two-hour videocassette, documenting a piece of mirrored glass measuring 30" by 30" that was dropped and shattered, then painstakingly reassembled by anonymous white-gloved hands, then broken again. For Zhang Huan, it was a performance that survives only as photographic evidence by the artist Rong Rong. Zhang Huan sat for one hour in a village public toilet

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<sup>1</sup> This work, while primarily attributed to Wu Shanzhuan, was a collaboration with his colleagues Huang Jian, Lu Haizhou, Luo Xianyue, Ni Haifeng, Song Chenghua and Zhang Haizhou.



on a hot summer afternoon, covered with honey and fish sauce to help attract the flies that landed on him and bit him for the duration of the event.

How did these media and these abstruse and dissident messages evolve from an artistic milieu where, in theory, policies that art must serve the nation's political and economic goals dictated the terms and conditions of creation? What are the resonances between these mediatic experimentations and the evolution of non-traditional art media in the West? Perhaps most crucial for the specific history of art in China, what if any are the connections between these art practices and the history of art in China prior to the establishment of the art academy system in the early twentieth century? Although the three works mentioned above bear no visual resemblance to each other, they are united by their subtle absurdity and their reliance on photo-based documentation. This crucial homology allowed these pieces to pass from the relative obscurity of their creation, witnessed first-hand by a small cohort of artist-colleagues, into the canon of Chinese contemporary art by Chinese and Western art historians, aided by the artists themselves.

These works are also linked by the experimental circumstances of their creation in the Reform Era by artists who had recently graduated from China's elite fine art academies with majors in oil painting. This program of study had long been linked to Socialist Realism, the style officially endorsed by the Chinese Communist Party since the 1940s, taught in the academy via a traditional Beaux-Arts-influenced curriculum that had been standard since the inception of these art academies in the Republican era (1910s and 1920s). While studying at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou<sup>2</sup> (Wu

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<sup>2</sup> As evidence that all Chinese art academies have undergone organizational, programmatic, and name changes over the course of the twentieth century, the former Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, previously the Hangzhou National College of Art, is now called the China Academy of Art (*Zhongguo Meishu Xueyuan*). This

Shanzhuan and Zhang Peili) and the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing (Zhang Huan), these three artists all immersed themselves in the resources that were made available to them by the academy, especially the academy libraries that housed otherwise unavailable Western art books and journals. While many of their classmates with similarly “avant-garde” leanings worked to develop new styles of oil painting (Cynical Realism, Political Pop), these three artists along with others formed distinct cohorts interested in new media experimentation, abandoning oil painting altogether. Upon graduation, all three artists definitively shifted their line of artistic inquiry from painting to non-traditional media, practices that were already thirty years old by international art world standards but entirely unprecedented in China. Their turn from painting brought their artistic practice more in line with their global contemporaries, and my study will reveal the ways in which a strategic deployment of foreign reception enabled the eventual success of their work in China. If their use of Western models made their work instantly readable in a globalized art world, their practices remained distinctly particular to their own historical-epistemological conditions, namely to their specific attempt to re-negotiate the concept of modernity that had been previously forged in the early twentieth century as a hybrid of Western and Chinese painting techniques. Rather than simply “belated” variations on established Western contemporary art practices, these artworks press us to examine the institutional conditions that encouraged individual and generational experimentation among Reform Era artists, yielding the turn to new media as semi-autonomous aesthetic and philosophical investigations.

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name change occurred in 1993, but for the purposes of this study, the academy will mostly be referred to by its name in the early Reform Era: the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art or ZAFAs.

As political and cultural liberalization ebbed and flowed throughout the Reform Era, artistic freedom was alternately encouraged and reigned in, but by no means was the official art commissioned by the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda department the only art that was allowed to be created without reproach. The pluralistic flowering of artistic practice in the Reform Era is part of the general intellectual exploration in China at this time, an exploration that relied heavily on a rigorous discussion of the concepts of modernity, modernization, and modernism. Overall, the cultural climate of the Reform Era encouraged a re-negotiation of concepts of nationalism and modernism. The work of Wu Shanzhuan, Zhang Peili, and their colleagues remained on the fringes of the official art world in the 1980s. This dissertation is predicated upon the fact that while at times this work drew censure or censorship from Party representatives, by and large it was not strictly supervised or routinely criticized, suggesting continuity with traditional admonitory practices and their capacity to be sustained by elite sub-groups within society.

Large-scale unofficial exhibitions and artist-generated publications were produced and circulated without incident throughout the mid- and late-1980s, culminating with the high-profile "China Avant-Garde" show at the National Gallery in Beijing in early 1989. As this work became more and more public, there were instances of censorship and criticism. For example, "China Avant-Garde" was temporarily closed, following Xiao Lu's performance involving her shooting her own installation work at the opening. These instances were not unprecedented, since Deng Xiaoping's official art policy was in many ways a carry-over of Mao Zedong's dictate that cultural work must service political goals, and that art must serve the people and socialism.

**Modernism and the Reform Era:  
*The Bureaucratic Style of Work Must be Dropped***

Avant-garde (*qianfeng*, 先锋) Chinese art in the Reform Era (1978-present) has been a study of an elusive Modernism (*xiandai zhuyi*, 现代主义). Modernism, purposely spelled in this case with a capital “M”, presents a special set of quandaries in China, as it addresses discursive concepts that soundly resonated with diverse circumstances across broad swaths of history. In his 1997 work *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, historian of Chinese art Craig Clunas presented a self-described “tendentious argument” that similarly “Modern” art making and art buying occurred in 17<sup>th</sup> century Rome, Amsterdam, Nanjing, and Yangzhou. This Modernism was based on the artists’ production of discrete, moveable, saleable art commodities and the collectors’ assignation of cultural and monetary value to works of art based on their authenticity and attribution to a particular, nameable artist.<sup>3</sup> Clunas thus provokes a transcultural understanding of the Modern with respect to purpose, scale, and medium, situating Modernism in the offices of precocious seventeenth century capitalists around the globe. This location of the “Early Modern” in the late Ming dynasty might seem somewhat farfetched with respect to the specific set of technological, historical and economic factors that gave rise to the specific artistic movements in Europe that are considered at the heart of high Modernism. Be that as it may, this broad, elastic definition of the modern is key to developing an understanding of modernism in late twentieth century China. It is the artistic resonances with the revived Confucian practice of considered critique and admonition that stand out as instances of a particularly Chinese modernism, and antecedents of this practice in

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<sup>3</sup> Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 13.

imperial China reveal an Early Modern tendency toward indirect but powerfully-felt criticism from the patriotic and dissident elite.

The Reform Era saw a thorough discussion of modernity (*xiandaixing*, 现代性) as well as modernism (*xiandai zhuyi*) in Chinese intellectual circles. The concept of modernity as it was addressed in intellectual circles in the 1980s and 1990s might seem a belated one that requires revisiting issues related to Westernization and modernization that surfaced in the late nineteenth century during the Self Strengthening Movement (1861-late 1890s) and the early twentieth century during the New Culture Movement (1910s-1920s). A large contingent of literary and philosophical scholars from the early twentieth century were concerned with Enlightenment-era Western philosophy. For these scholars, dubbed neo-rationalists, the “modernity” of Reform Era China lay in the general pluralization of the intellectual realm and the re-introduction of philosophy and science in addition to Maoist theory that had dominated all public discourse during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>4</sup> These neo-rationalists, including Chen Kuide, Gan Yang, and Zhou Guoping, came of age in the mid-twentieth century and were educated before the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). They advocated generalized reform and modernization within the dominant Maoist-Marxist cultural paradigm.

Theoretically aligned with early Western modern tendencies painted with a broad brush including optimistic humanism, these neo-rationalist intellectuals were united in their general orientation towards scientific reason and rationality. The epistemological turn that Chen Kuide and his colleagues advocated was thus not terribly radical, but an orientation toward pluralism of any kind after the totalitarian regime of

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<sup>4</sup> Min Lin and Maria Galikowski. *The Search for Modernity: Chinese Intellectuals and Cultural Discourse in the Post-Mao Era* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 14.

Mao was significant. Official tolerance of this type of pluralism and the emergence of a cohort of public intellectuals in the 1980s implied the tacit acceptance and even encouragement of a revival of the Chinese literati class. This class was traditionally comprised of generalists who were equally comfortable discussing economic, social, and political issues as well as supervising education of the next generation of scholars and practicing literary arts and poetry. These historical public intellectuals also had a moral obligation to initiate reforms by criticizing officials who strayed from Confucian ideals. The re-emergence of this class in the public sphere during the post-Mao Reform Era was contained within the confines one-party political system, but the moral obligation remained.

Clunas' conception of modernity thus becomes useful when one considers that the re-emergence of the public intellectual occurred in the context of the wide-reaching economic reforms of the 1980s and the growth of a market economy. The fact that the art academies had re-emerged with the nation's economic reforms as a backdrop was a clear sign that China might soon see a renewal of Clunas' "modern," salable art commodities, attributable to a named artist instead of the large-scale publicly commissioned art works that had dominated the previous decades. This re-emergence of the artist-individual, as opposed to the socialist artist-worker, is a key component of the modern intellectual sphere and the admonitory culture that this thesis addresses. The Neo-rationalists and other Reform Era humanities scholars were the product of twentieth century Chinese university education, and didn't boast the same amateur facility with art as their literati counterparts had. This is a crucial difference that highlights the fact that Chinese Reform Era artists were a special subset of the general class of public intellectuals that began to re-inhabit the role of the critical scholar-official at this time.

Neo-rationalist intellectual explorations were not directly related to politics and policy-making and thus allowed a considerable amount of latitude to discuss hypothetical and theoretical circumstances. Their discussions came to revolve around discussions of individual subjectivity, morality, and hermeneutics of truth and beauty.<sup>5</sup> The Neo-rationalists were the closest group to a senior intellectual establishment in Reform Era China, and they were soon challenged and sidestepped by younger, more radically-oriented, iconoclastic scholars and writers, including Liu Xiaobo, Bei Dao, and Xu Xing as well as artists like Wu Shanzhuan, Zhang Peili, and Zhang Huan. These iconoclasts were also interested in Western philosophy, but they skipped over Enlightenment rationalism in favor of more contemporary intellectual movements: Existentialist thought and Post-modern philosophy. The simultaneity of uptake of these historically discrete Western philosophies is characteristic of the Reform Era. Importantly, experimentation in artistic medium and literary genre was a key manifestation of the general dissatisfaction with the limited nature of “reform” in the Reform Era. In the case of new media in art, the turn away from experimentation in oil painting, itself a rich field, was a significant denial of the status quo and the official educational system that had shaped these young artists.

The work that is at the heart of this dissertation project, namely, the installations of Wu Shanzhuan, the video art of Zhang Peili, and the performance work of Zhang Huan, is decidedly contemporary in form and concept.<sup>6</sup> These works are all oriented toward a postmodern aesthetic that avoided traditional beauty and courted “anti-art,”

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<sup>5</sup> Lin and Galikowski. *The Search for Modernity*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> The term contemporary is being applied here to indicate the visual synchronicity of these works with contemporaneous global artistic production although the artists themselves most likely referred to their work as “modern” (*xiandai*).

incorporating mundane imagery and provoking an examination of some of the more dismal aspects of society.<sup>7</sup> It is important to understand these works' form and content as part of a broader Chinese cultural negotiation of modernity in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. These negotiations in art, and in the realm of philosophy, literature, film and music accompanied and encouraged the economic, social, and political reforms of the Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin administrations (1978-1989 and 1989-2002, respectively). Specifically, it is the role of the artist as a cultural critic and societal conscience that has come to epitomize new Chinese art on the national and world stage.

This role has profound resonance with the traditional Chinese scholar-artist's practice of withdrawing from public life and instead creating admonitory works of art that couch specific political criticisms in ostensibly apolitical works of art. Artists like the Ming dynasty Zhe School of painters (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> c.) and the Yuan dynasty painter Wu Zhen (1280-1354) produced work that embodied the artists' dissent. Wu Zhen's work *Fisherman* (c.1350, Metropolitan Museum of Art) is a typical depiction of a scholar-hermit, unemployed, impoverished, and reclusive due to his falling out of favor with the Yuan court. The colophone reads:

Red leaves west of the village reflect evening rays  
Yellow reeds on a sandy bank cast early moon shadows.  
Lightly stirring his oar,  
Thinking of returning home,  
He puts aside his fishing pole and will catch no more.<sup>8</sup>

The depiction of the lone fisherman, ostensibly an exiled scholar who chose morality over a successful career, and his peaceful existence in nature was a recurring trope in these works. Wu Zhen himself lived as a recluse and without court patronage, which is partly why he was admired by subsequent generations of painters. Dai Jin (1388-1462),

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash: Bay Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> "Wu Zhen: Fisherman (1989.363.33)."



considered the founder of the Ming dynasty Zhe School, was another painter who lived without official patronage. Dai's rendering of a lone hermit in *Returning Home Through the Snow* (c.1455, Metropolitan Museum of Art) shows the humble underdressed exile in a similarly peaceful, if more overtly harsh, environment. A close examination of the image reveals the tattered state of his clothing and the futility of his attempt to shield his face from the cold with his arm. During the Reform Era, contemporary artists rediscovered these Chinese artistic practices as well as the highly individualistic and politically aware Modern masters of Europe and the U.S.

This dissertation will track the epistemological turn that took place in Chinese intellectual discourse in the 1980s and 1990s that gave rise to the type of visual modernity steeped with admonishment practiced by Zhang Peili, Zhang Huan, and Wu Shanzhuan. It is my contention that the intellectual environment at China's top art academies during the Reform Era specifically fostered the education and development of creative and even iconoclastic leaders. These art workers, as they had been called under Mao, were identified as important contributors to the new society and to China's competitiveness in a global marketplace.<sup>9</sup> It is important to understand that an atemporal modernity and its implicit break with an early modern "tradition" are necessary components of the experimental art practices in China during the 1980s and 1990s.

Deng Xiaoping's 1978 economic reforms and the official program of "thought emancipation" opened China to previously banned artifacts of Western culture, including art, literature, history, philosophy, and film, as well as commercial goods, all of which had

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<sup>9</sup> Bonnie S. McDougall and Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, Michigan papers in Chinese studies, no. 39 (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies; University of Michigan, 1980).

a profound impact on the art academy system. He specifically sought a rapprochement with the artistic elite, encouraging feedback in the form of thoughtful criticism and admonishment that would have been unthinkable during the Cultural Revolution. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping greeted the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists by announcing his new guiding principles for the arts in the post-Mao era:

Special stress must be laid on the training of talented writers and artists... Through improved ideological and administrative work, we should create the necessary conditions for persons of outstanding talent to emerge and mature.

Party committees at all levels should give good leadership to literary and art work. Leadership doesn't mean handing out administrative orders and demanding that literature and art serve immediate, short-range political goals. It means understanding the special characteristics of literature and art and the laws of their development and creating conditions for them to flourish. That is, it means creating conditions that help writers and artists to improve their skills and to produce fine works and performances truly worthy of our great people and era. ... *The bureaucratic style of work must be dropped.* There must be no more issuing of administrative orders regarding the creation and criticism of literature and art.<sup>10</sup>

Deng's optimism towards positive contributions that the arts could make and the Party's role in understanding and facilitating the creative arts reflect the relatively liberal environment that Wu Shanzhuan and Zhang Peili experienced at the Zhejiang Academy when it was re-opened after the Cultural Revolution. This liberalization did not, however, change the fundamental tenets of state art policy laid out by Mao Zedong in his talks on art and literature at Yanan in 1942 whereby art and literature must always be created to serve the "people." What was revised was a definition of the people as consisting of more than workers, peasants, and soldiers. Now, "the people" would

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<sup>10</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "Speech greeting the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists, (October 30, 1979)," People's Daily Online, English Edition Web site, accessed 13 October 2009, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1350.html>. My italics.

include some of the educated elite who were no longer to be uniformly condemned for their bourgeois tendencies.

What Deng offered was not a radical re-configuration of cultural policy, but a reconciliation with China's own modernist and Republican past as well as certain elements of Confucian meritocracy and the accompanying admonitory practices. These long-vilified intellectuals could now find a productive place in Reform Era China as had their forebears during the May Fourth Movement in the early twentieth century. For example, the art academies still upheld a conservative curriculum founded in drawing from plaster casts, but in the early 1980s the academy's plaster busts of Lenin and Marx were gradually replaced with casts of classical Greek and Roman sculptures more consistent with those used in academies modeled on the *École des Beaux Arts*. The life drawing classes still carried out Socialist Realist exercises in which students visited factories and farms to draw workers and peasants, but they also began to re-institute Republican Era practices such as plein air *xiesheng* (life drawing, 写生) excursions, originally instituted by Lin Fengmin in the 1920s. The curriculum was not wide open – no curriculum ever is – but the sense of change was palpable.

Throughout the 1980s, there were periodic attempts to reign in some of the artistic freedoms that Deng's 1979 address had encouraged, including the 1982-1984 Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign (launched by Cultural Revolution era Party officials, partially in response to Neo-rationalist discourses on epistemology) that sought to purge writers and artists exhibiting the “polluting” influences of feudalism and capitalism visible in the popularity of abstract humanism and “the worship of individualism.”<sup>11</sup> During this

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<sup>11</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 357-358.

period official exhibitions and art periodicals showed only official socialist realist artwork, reminiscent of the singular standards upheld during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>12</sup> But in 1984, the pendulum swung back again toward the encouragement of liberalization in the arts.

Deng's 1984 policy shift, which was coupled with the removal of the leftist gerontocracy of Cultural Revolution-era officials who had launched the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign, was met with understandable skepticism on the part of many self-proclaimed avant-garde artists who had come of age in the late 1970s. Nonetheless, unofficial artists as a whole welcomed the return to liberalization even if they had to be tentative about its endurance. This was particularly true after Deng's policies were matched with new calls for innovation and individualization in the arts by senior art-world figures, many of who were leaders of official artists' organizations in China's extensive arts bureaucracy. New arts periodicals emerged, and even older official publications underwent editorial changes, publishing articles on the importance of artistic freedom and openness to the outside world. These periodicals also promoted new art by young avant-garde artists that presented a clear challenge to the status quo.<sup>13</sup> The newly-available Western and previously banned Chinese texts and media presented a simultaneous and collapsed view of Modern and Postmodern movements – all of twentieth century art and theory was bewilderingly present in its reproduced forms. This period has been described by the artist Xu Bing as one of cerebral overload:

In that particular historical period of the late 70s and early 80s, I read all kinds of books related to art. I read much like a hungry man eating too much all of a sudden and who could not digest it all. I wanted to make a

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<sup>12</sup> Julia F. Andrews, "Fragmented Memory – an Introduction," in Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1993), 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

different book, my book, to express my feelings, not difficult theories of the profound, but focus on an essential topic – the possibilities of language. That was my feeling, in an artist’s way, not as a philosopher who analyzes, but as an artist with true feeling.<sup>14</sup>

Xu’s response to the flood of available theory and other source material is simultaneously a rapprochement with an almost Romantic sensibility that art must be an expression of “true feeling,” and a turn away from popular communication, towards elite culture production, in the form of an abstract and illegible text, his *Book from the Sky* (1987). Both movements are indicative of the experimentation that looked to modernist and traditional sources in unofficial art circles at the time. Xu’s invocation of the Daoist practice of spirit-writing, a supposed automatic channeling of communications (often admonitions) from the dead, reveals a strong connection to esoteric and elite Chinese culture as well as that of the academic West. It is important to understand that this type of overload might better be understood with respect to the diversity of philosophical movements that gained traction during the 1980s. Young iconoclastic writers, scholars, and artists were not necessarily inclined to “digest” and analyze all available Western and Confucian philosophical schools, but rather to selectively incorporate Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre as well as Chinese sources like Wu Zhen and Dai Jin into their own modernist experiments.

In June 1989, immediately after the crackdown on pro-democracy student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, Deng Xiaoping addressed his generals, stating that the recent protests were a result of, “the confrontation between the Four Cardinal

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Xu Bing in Ying Wang and Sun Yan, *Reinventing Tradition in a New World: The Arts of Gu Wenda, Wang Mansheng, Xu Bing and Zhang Hongtu* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 2004), 31.

Principles and bourgeois liberalization,”<sup>15</sup> indicating that all policies, including those in the arts, would at least temporarily become more synchronous with the political stance of the Party’s central committee. This tightening of the reins on artistic production did not have a permanent effect on arts policy or signal a sea change in the creative freedoms of practicing artists or the academies, however. By 1998, when Jiang Zemin wrote an inscription for the Central Academy on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding, there was no mention of art serving the people or upholding the Four Cardinal Principles. Rather, the inscription simply reads, “Develop fine arts education to produce professionals with morals and skills.”

Chinese artists’ participation in high-profile international art events like the Venice Biennale (beginning with the 45<sup>th</sup> Biennale in 1993) and large-scale group exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe in the mid- and late-1990s helped draw attention to the artistic production in mainland China during the early Reform Era. Recent events like the mysterious detention of the artist Ai Weiwei from April through June 2011 reveal how the political system in Reform Era China is neither open nor transparent and the role of the artist is not that of a critic with *carte blanche*. Ai, an outspoken detractor of the government, has used his celebrity abroad and domestically as China’s pre-eminent blogger to draw attention to Chinese governmental offenses. These include the razing of poor Beijing neighborhoods in order to beautify the city for the 2008 Olympics, and systematic municipal corruption that led to the building of unsafe school buildings that collapsed during the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. Ai’s detention and beating reveal a type of authoritarian governmental intervention that offends the liberal sensibilities of the West

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<sup>15</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “Address to Officers at the Rank of General and Above in Command of the Troops Enforcing Martial Law in Beijing (June 9, 1989),” *People’s Daily*, June 28, 1989, reprinted in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1982-1992)* (Beijing: Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 297.

and the global art community; it must be taken into account along with the relatively open and encouraging environment that the avant-garde arts have experienced in China in the past decade. For example, In an example of municipal largesse unheard of in the Euro-American art world, Wu Shanzhuan (who was based in Hamburg for most of the 1990s and 2000s) and Zhang Peili (who had gone abroad to New York for brief artist's residencies in the early 1990s but decided to return each time to his hometown of Hangzhou instead of expatriating) were awarded their own museums by the local government of Dujiangyan in Sichuan Province in 2007.<sup>16</sup> Also, like institutions of higher education in the Western world, China's national art academies have embraced their successful, though somewhat controversial, alumni and recruited them for high-profile teaching and administrative positions. Zhang Peili was recruited by his alma mater, the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, to found China's first department of new media in 2001, a remarkable fusion of the academy with an ostensibly oppositional avant-garde – anathema to Western modernism, but explicable within the Chinese context of admonition and institutional self-correction. Xu Bing was brought back to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 2008 as its Vice President for International Relations after spending 18 years working abroad in New York.<sup>17</sup> When questioned about the possibility of governmental intervention at the academy, Xu replied that, “The old concept about art and government being at odds has changed. Now artists and the

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<sup>16</sup> David Barboza, “A Gift Offer for Artists in China: Museums,” *The New York Times* 25 August 2007, Accessed 9 May 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/25/arts/design/25muse.html>.

<sup>17</sup> David Barboza, “Schooling the Artists’ Republic of China,” *The New York Times* 30 March 2008, Accessed 9 May 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/30/arts/design/30barb.html?pagewanted=all>.

government are basically the same. All the artists and the government are both running with development.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Admonition and Chinese Art**

The tradition of Confucian literati criticism of governmental policies, whereby the educated elite saw it as their right and duty to indicate when the government had strayed from its moral ideals, extended into the twentieth century during the Republican and People’s Republic eras. Such movements have precedents dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, with many more recent examples of *qingyi* (pure thought, 清议) movements in the early seventeenth century (late Ming dynasty) and late nineteenth century (late Qing dynasty).<sup>19</sup> While the Imperial and Republican period saw intermittent crackdowns against such communications, by and large this “court of moral judgment”<sup>20</sup> allowed for intellectuals’ dissenting opinions to reach high governmental offices through official channels (*yan lu*, 言路) which eventually included Communist Party-controlled newspapers and journals. As before, there were significant periods of time when such criticism was considered unwelcome and unlawful under Mao, especially during the early

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* The parallels that Xu draws between the ostensibly avant-garde artists and their governmental counterparts during a time of rapid economic development echo the sentiments of Andy Warhol with regards to the leveling effect of capitalist mass production that merits quoting here: “What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.” (Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 100-101).

<sup>19</sup> Merle Goldman, *China’s Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Merle Goldman, “The Party and the Intellectuals,” in *Cambridge History of China. 14, Part 1, The People’s Republic. The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949-1965*, eds. Roderick Mac Farquhar and John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 218.



1960s and throughout the Cultural Revolution. It was during such closures that mid-twentieth century intellectuals turned to the traditions of *za wen* (杂文) – satirical essays, poetry, and art – that had long served to disguise criticisms and dissent.

Historical examples of politically oriented criticism couched in artwork were often as simple as a general call to withdraw from official court life, as instanced by the work of influential Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) landscape painters such as Wu Zhen and Ni Zan (1301-1374). Wu and Ni were among the Four Masters of the Yuan, a group whose work transformed the genre of landscape painting by moving away from compositions that were imitative of nature. Instead, these landscape paintings featured lone human figures or their iconographic stand-ins (pine trees, bamboo) for educated recluses who had withdrawn from the corruption of society and politics, derived from the painters' imaginary contemplations. They were thus considered to be indicative of the scholar-artists' emotional state and convictions: the artist's proficiency at employing previous masters' styles of brushwork revealed his affiliation with the values of previous political regimes; the compositional elements pine trees, bamboo, rocks, and small thatched huts symbolized virtues, veiled criticisms, and in some cases commemorated anti-dynastic gatherings and events. These hermit-landscape paintings were part of a much larger alternative literati culture that convened in private and shunned the public sphere.

My dissertation takes these paradigms of admonishment as crucial to the understanding of key reform-era works by Zhang Peili, Wu Shanzhuan, and Zhang Huan. Artist-made photographs of durational works as in Zhang Huan's stoic performance *12 Square Meters* (1994) that took place in an unimproved public toilet, for example, demonstrate a small elite culture sustaining an artistically driven opposition to the party-

state's pretensions to satisfy all public needs. In addition to the undercurrent of admonishment, such works allow an examination of the reform era trend toward experimentation in new media art in particular was part of a larger negotiation of *xiandai yishu* (modern art, 现代艺术) and *xiandai zhuyi* (modernism) by artists in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The term *xiandai zhuyi* was used by artists both to distinguish their work from Cultural Revolution era Socialist Realism (*shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi*, 社会主义现实主义), Maoist Revolutionary Realism (*Maozhuyi gemingzhe xianshizhuyi*, 毛主义革命者现实主义), and a to reflect the resonance that they felt both with the avant-gardes of early twentieth century Western Modernism, and with the early twentieth century Republican-era modernization in Chinese culture. Significantly, the early Chinese modernization to which they felt an affinity had been fueled by the considered and careful criticism of the government by the elite intellectual classes.

The revealing linkage with elite admonishment was gradually concealed by a shift in terminology from the early 1990s onward, when the term *xiandai yishu* was supplanted by the more globally synchronous phrase *dangdai yishu* (contemporary art, 当代艺术). A market had emerged, yielding increased interaction and interdependence between the Chinese art world and a global art world that exclusively used the term contemporary to refer to current artistic production. Concomitantly, there was a theoretical distancing from the modernist projects of both twentieth century Europe and Republican-era China. My thesis is that these artists' early experimentation with non-traditional media reflect a personal and generational resonance with the conception of *xiandai zhuyi* that cannot be seen as a simple critical opposition to the strict institutional frameworks of the Chinese art world. Neither can it be seen as a misplaced terminology that was later corrected by a

more “contemporary” global art system. Rather, the early tropism toward a modernism that could be wielded in the Chinese context is informed by their complicated relationship with the fine art academy system and their understanding of the artist’s duty to produce thoughtful criticism of unjust policies.

This historical form of hidden criticism lodged within elite cultural circles resurfacing as a possible source for contemporary artwork in China stands in stark contrast to European models of political messages, historically carried by the state-endorsed and highly public vehicle of history painting. The eighteenth century French painter Jacques-Louis David was able to address pre- and post-Revolutionary political issues with allegorical paintings such as the *Oath of the Horatii* (1784, Louvre) and *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799, Louvre), both of which were viewed by those in power at high-profile public exhibitions. Wu Zhen, on the other hand, created works like the *Fisherman* handscroll (c. 1350), intended only for private viewing and circulation among his colleagues. His lone fisherman is composed of a few small brushstrokes, framed by a steep riverbank and bending pine tree, and the artist’s accompanying poem.<sup>21</sup> All of these symbolic elements would be legible as admonitory only by a member of his educated literati class and best understood by his own circle of Suzhou scholars. The admonitory aspect to Wu Zhen’s painting is not the rallying cry that David presents to his viewing public. Instead it is a corroboration of the existence of an elite, inward-facing unofficial culture sustaining itself in quiet opposition to life at the Imperial court.

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<sup>21</sup> “Wu Zhen: Fisherman (1989.363.33).”

### **And now, a word from the Contemporary Chinese Art Market**

*“The art market is the place where, by some secret alchemy, the cultural good becomes a commodity.”*<sup>22</sup>  
-Raymonde Moulin, *The French Art Market: a sociological view*

Just prior to the 2011 news about the arrest and detainment of the outspoken dissident artist Ai Weiwei, the art market information service provider Artprice announced that the world’s art markets had dramatically shifted in 2010. Previously, the top three nations for art auction revenues were the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Suddenly, the first place had gone to China, followed by the U.S. and the U.K.<sup>23</sup> Artwork sold on the secondary market in China is not limited to Chinese art nor is it primarily contemporary art. In fact the top grossing artists are mostly “Old Masters” (a European art historical category recently and broadly applied to Chinese art) including Bada Shanren (1626-1705) and Shen Zhou (1427-1509), and “Modern Masters” (another recently imported term from European art history) including Xu Beihong (1895-1953) and Li Keran (1907-1989). Still, both the primary and secondary markets for contemporary Chinese art have become extremely exuberant in the Reform Era, and the impact on artistic production in Mainland China has been keenly felt. The experimental new media production of the 1980s can certainly be seen as a response to the rise in a private market for art, as it existed in the West.

In this context, it is especially interesting to note, in light of the restrictive governmental views on art and its applications in society under Mao, that towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, officials turned to contemporary painting as a potential

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<sup>22</sup> Raymonde Moulin, *The French Art Market: a sociological view* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 3, cited in Derrick Chong, “Stakeholder relationships in contemporary art,” in *Understanding International Art Markets and Management*, edited by Iain Robertson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 91.

<sup>23</sup> Miriam Kreinin Souccar, “Art-world power shifts to China,” *Crain’s New York Business.com* 27 March 2011, accessed 8 April 2011, <http://www.craainsnewyork.com/article/20110327/SMALLBIZ/303279971#>.

source of revenue. Around 1971, premier Zhou Enlai enlisted traditional *guohua* artists, many of whom had suffered greatly as a result of Cultural Revolution policies, asking them to once again become “art workers” and produce ink paintings for foreign export. By exporting identifiably Chinese art as a commodity for foreign consumption, Zhou established a double standard, promoting traditional ink and brush paintings abroad while maintaining Proletarian Realism and officially sanctioned forms of Chinese folk art as the only appropriate art for domestic consumption. Later, in the Reform Era, Deng Xiaoping’s policy’s of opening to the West have had a profound impact on the art produced by artists working in China, and creating the conditions for a new kind of art market, influenced by the global boom in contemporary art and the more recent interest in “unofficial” oil painting.

The story of Chinese industry in general during the reform era has been one of planned evolution away from a strictly controlled economy through experimental and incremental change, from agricultural reforms to the disaggregation of state owned enterprises and the establishment of private enterprise. The story of the art market is quite distinct from the trajectory of most industries because the policies of economic liberalization set in motion under Deng Xiaoping did not call for its reform but rather its creation. In some ways, its development seems quite the opposite of most other industries, because it grew from an unofficial network characterized by word-of-mouth transactions to a centrally regulated industry. Its development, however, is not completely without comparison in the overall Chinese economic landscape since it developed in a loose, organic fashion, with entrepreneurial individuals experimenting in creating a market before their businesses were deemed officially legal.

Discussions of the nascent market for contemporary art in China begin around the mid to late 1980s, which coincided with the waning power of the State in terms of content regulation and patronage. The world of unofficial dissident art had been opened up in 1979 with the work of the avant-garde collective known as the Stars (*Xingxing*, 星星). The years following their first controversial exhibitions saw the emergence of a new career path for artists, outside of the state-sponsored art world of teaching positions and government commissions.<sup>24</sup> These unofficial artists began working in their own studios or apartments, trying to sell their work without the trappings of a gallery system through personal connections. They often enlisted the help of foreign friends to act as agents between the artist and the only viable market for unofficial dissident art: foreign diplomats and scholars, expatriate residents in China, and tourists.<sup>25</sup> This type of informal art market became so widespread that by December 1989, according to the *China Daily* newspaper, there were at least 250 artists in Beijing trying to sell their work this way.<sup>26</sup> Painters and other visual artists had an unheard of degree of autonomy, but their careers had a new instability similar to that of artists in the Western world and faced with their own economic independence they now had to make aesthetic choices with collectors' tastes in mind. This is not to say that all unofficial art that emerged in the reform era was commercial in nature, or that commercially successful unofficial artists were merely pandering to the perceived tastes of foreign (almost assuredly Western) collectors. Still, the contemporary art that has come to dominate

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<sup>24</sup> Julia F Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Annamma Joy and John F. Sherry, Jr., "Framing Considerations in the PRC: Creating Value in the Contemporary Chinese Art Market," *Consumption, Markets, and Culture*, vol. 7, no.4, (December 2004): 323.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Sullivan, "Art in China since 1949," *The China Quarterly*, No. 159, Special Issue: The People's Republic of China After 50 Years, September 1999, 717.

international auctions is largely oil painting that bears some stylistic similarity to post-War European and American painting movements and was first collected by non-Chinese buyers.

It is worth noting that the independent careers forged by painters and other visual artists at this time were quite distinct from the situations of other cultural workers in the reform era. The effects of Deng-era economic reforms in other parts of the Chinese arts and cultural realm led to performing arts troupes, like other bulky state owned enterprises that were saddled with the costs of salaries, pensions, housing, and medical care, being revamped with new income streams following the slogan “use commerce to nurture art (*yishang yangwen*).”<sup>27</sup> This resulted in hugely unsuccessful diversification, like the Central Philharmonic Orchestra’s attempt to open and operate a restaurant. The result, told by the Deputy Director Xie Ming in 1986 was that, “Not only have we not made any money, but we have built up a big pile of problems by doing things sloppily.”<sup>28</sup>

In the late 1980s, art galleries began to emerge in China’s biggest cities, and by 1991, they were made legal, setting in motion the more formalized mechanisms for exhibiting, pricing and selling works of art.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the exhibition and sale of contemporary Chinese oil painting abroad (largely in the U.S.) was encouraged, and a few galleries in New York began to represent Chinese artists.<sup>30</sup> The most prominent galleries in China were all foreign-owned and catered to a largely Western clientele: Red Gate Gallery was opened in Beijing in 1991 by Brian Wallace (an Australian who had come to Beijing to study Chinese language and art); Courtyard Gallery in Beijing was

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arts in China: the New Politics of Culture* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Joy and Sherry, “Framing Considerations,” 323.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Sullivan, “Art in China since 1949,” 717.

opened in 1996 by Chinese American lawyer Handel Lee and managed by the British curator Karen Smith; and ShanghART gallery was opened in Shanghai in 1994 by Lorenz Helbling (a Swiss student of Chinese language who had some experience as an art dealer in Europe).<sup>31</sup> This time period in the early to mid 1990s was also when contemporary unofficial Chinese art began to garner international attention, with exposure at the Venice Biennale (1993, 1995), the São Paulo Biennale (1994, 1996), and the Asia-Pacific Triennial in Fukuoka (1993, 1996), as well as, toward the late 1990s, major museum exhibitions in Europe and the United States.

While all of these new developments in the art world contributed to the value creation in contemporary Chinese oil painting that has culminated in the speculative international auction market described earlier, the market was not wholly independent of the Chinese state. The government's role was that of a broker connecting Chinese artists with foreign collectors. In 1992, following Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, the municipal government of Guangdong province sponsored the First Art Fair in Guangzhou, inviting foreign dealers and museums to help jump-start a market for contemporary Chinese artwork.<sup>32</sup> In general, all players looked to the experienced art professionals from outside of China in order to realize the potential of contemporary Chinese art as an international commodity. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the central government began trying to more actively develop the cultural industries sector with a domestic audience (and market) in mind. In 1998, the Cultural Industries Bureau, an entity responsible for making and implementing policies related to cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Joy and Sherry, "Framing Considerations."

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.



markets, was established under the Ministry of Culture.<sup>33</sup> In 2002, in one of many examples of official promotion of cultural industries, the report of the Chinese Communist Party's 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress stated that, "In the current market economy, developing the culture industry is a very important way to achieve socialist cultural prosperity and to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the people."<sup>34</sup> In other words, economically self-sustaining art and cultural enterprises in all forms were enthusiastically encouraged for the benefit of the Chinese people and culture as a whole. This included both "public" (i.e. municipal and local) institutions analogous to the non-profit art world in the U.S., and businesses associated with the primary and secondary sale of art objects. Collecting art was no longer an artifact of bourgeois or reactionary culture, rather it was part of the network of cultural activities that would help create a new kind of "socialist cultural prosperity." By all accounts the public taste for art-related industries has indeed grown over the past six years, as a recent declaration that museums in Beijing and Shanghai be made free of charge resulted in massive daily attendance and chaotic crowd scenes.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Estella Collection and the Global Craze for Contemporary Chinese Oil Painting**

The development of the Chinese art market in general and foreign speculation in contemporary painting is a key component to understanding the critical and less-commercial works of Zhang Peili, Zhang Huan, and Wu Shanzhuan. While they have all

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<sup>33</sup> Meiqin Wang, "Confrontation and Complicity: Rethinking Official Art in Contemporary China," (PhD diss., Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2007), 82.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>35</sup> "Mayhem reigns at free-for-all museums," *The People's Daily Online*, 16 February 2008, accessed 9 May 2008, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90782/90872/6355294.html>; "Beijing Museum Tickets become popular collector's item," *Artron.net* 14 April 2008, accessed 29 April 2008, [http://en.artron.net/news/news.php?newid=43639&site\\_id=1&channel\\_id=21&column\\_id=](http://en.artron.net/news/news.php?newid=43639&site_id=1&channel_id=21&column_id=)

achieved commercial success, it must be understood that they are much less successful than their contemporaries who work in more traditional media. An astounding example of the state of the market came with the aggregation and sale of the Estella Collection, a significant collection of contemporary avant-garde oil painting in 2008.

On April 9, 2008, 108 works from this single collection were auctioned at Sotheby's Hong Kong. This auction, held at a time of uncertainty for Asian stock markets, had a slightly more sober atmosphere than the standing-room-only auctions of a year previous.<sup>36</sup> Still, prices of the most sought-after artists' works continued to climb as they had for the previous five years.<sup>37</sup> The sale of these works, about half of the Estella collection, totaled \$17.8 million, about 150% of the pre-sale high estimate of \$12 million. This sale was just one of Sotheby's spring auctions of contemporary Chinese art in Hong Kong. The total for all auctions in this category came to \$51.7 million, an impressive sum for the relatively new auction category, but a fairly modest total when compared to the auction prices of postwar and contemporary American and European artworks – for example, *one* 1974 painting by Francis Bacon sold for \$51.7 million at Christie's London in February 2008. But the Estella sale set new auction records for some of China's most renowned contemporary artists, including the painter Zhang Xiaogang (b. 1958) whose 1995 painting "Bloodline: The Big Family No. 3" sold for over \$6 million to a buyer that Sotheby's identified as a Taiwan born collector living in the U.S.<sup>38</sup> This broke the previous (short-lived) auction record for a contemporary Chinese artist, \$5.9 for Yue Minjun's (b. 1962) 1995 painting "Execution," achieved in Sotheby's London salesroom

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<sup>36</sup> Le-Min Lim, "Records, Disappointments Mark Sotheby's Auction of Chinese Art," *Bloomberg.com*, 9 April 2008, accessed 1 May 2008, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=apHxGEqwy4Eo>.

<sup>37</sup> "Chinese Art Continues to Soar at Sotheby's," *The New York Times* 10 April 2008, Arts/Cultural Desk, 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

in October 2007. Zhang's record, however, was shattered later that evening when Sotheby's Hong Kong auctioned off Liu Xiaodong's (b. 1963) "Battlefield Realism: The 18 Arhats" (2004) for \$7.9 million. These prices are indicative of the contemporary Chinese art market, and of the global reach of this formerly small niche market.<sup>39</sup>

The phenomenal success of the sale of the first half of the Estella collection is part of the larger story of the international market for Chinese art, specifically modern and contemporary art that has attracted attention from all over the art world. It is also a cautionary tale for many art world players including artists, scholars, and museum curators, who feel betrayed that the collection, which they had contributed to in thinking it was being assembled for eventual donation to a museum, was so quickly flipped at such a hefty profit. It turns out that this collection, formed under the direction of the London and New York based dealer Michael Goedhuis during the period around 2004-2007, was the property not of a single collector, but a group of New York investors led by two executives of Invus Financial Advisors, Ray Debbane and Sacha Lainovic, now chairman and director, respectively, at WeightWatchers International, Inc.<sup>40</sup> These investors

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<sup>39</sup> To give a sense of how quickly these prices have appreciated, a similar painting by Zhang Xiaogang sold at Christie's New York in November 2006 for \$1.3 million. The original prices paid for these works five to ten years ago was probably between \$10,000-50,000. (David Barboza, "An Auction of New Chinese Art Leaves Disjointed Noses in Its Wake," *The New York Times*, 7 May 2008, Arts/Cultural Desk, 1; Katya Kazakina and Linda Sandler, "New York Dealer to Sell \$12 Million 'Estella' Chinese Art," *Bloomberg.com*, 28 March 2008, accessed 15 April 2008), [http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a6PZY\\_AYrZgI](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a6PZY_AYrZgI).

<sup>40</sup> Michael Goedhuis is a Dutch-born art dealer educated in economics at Eton College who earned an MBA from INSEAD. He owns galleries in London and New York, and is known for his openly business-oriented approach to art collecting as a financial investment. Formerly an investment banker in New York, Goedhuis began his career in the art world at the Rothschild art investment companies after returning to school to study art history at the Courtauld Institute in London. He began his career as an independent dealer in 1982, working in antiquities from the Middle East, India, China, and Japan, areas he saw as undervalued in the art market. In the 1990s he began to work with contemporary Chinese art, opening Goedhuis Contemporary in London in 1995, and in New York in 2002, just before he began to collect for the Estella collection.

It should be noted that the Belgian Baron Guy Ullens, a major collector of contemporary Chinese art and founder of the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, is the president and chief executive of the Luxembourg-based Artal Group, the parent company of WeightWatchers since 1999.

embarked upon their project of forming an expansive and comprehensive collection of contemporary Chinese art in all media beginning with work from the mid-1990s, disclosing that they hoped it would be the basis of a comprehensive book. That book came to pass in 2007 as a hefty 460 page exhibition catalogue entitled *China Onward*, to accompany an exhibition of the collection at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark. The bulk of the catalogue was written by Britta Erickson, one of the foremost scholars of contemporary Chinese art, with contributions from other prominent figures in the field. All in all it was a visually lavish, academically grounded tome that served to underscore the collection's art historical value. The collection was on view in Denmark from March to August of 2007, then traveled to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where it was on view from September 2007 to early March 2008, closing just a few weeks before the Hong Kong auction in April. When Sotheby's announced the sale at the end of March, 2008, it became apparent that the collection had changed hands in August 2007, when the group led by Debbane and Lainovic sold the collection to the New York art dealer William Acquavella for an undisclosed price that art market experts have guessed to be about \$25 million and that Goedhuis has described as "hugely profitable for [the] investors."<sup>41</sup> Acquavella apparently financed the deal in collaboration with Sotheby's, as the auction house was obliged to disclaim in the Estella collection auction catalog that the company,

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Ullens has not been linked to the Estella collection, and indeed he has been quoted as saying, "Our job is to promote emerging artists. The \$2 million canvas is not for us." (Guy Ullens, quoted in Christina Ruiz, "China gets its first contemporary art museum," *The Art Newspaper*, issue 187, 20 December 2007, accessed 8 May 2008, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/article.asp?id=7043>; "ZoomInfo Web Profile: Michael Goedhuis," *Zoominfo.com*, accessed 9 May 2008, <http://www.zoominfo.com/Search/PersonDetail.aspx?PersonID=80449777>; "About the Gallery," & "Michael Goedhuis," *Goedhuis Contemporary Web Site*, Goedhuis Contemporary Gallery, accessed 9 May 2008, <http://goedhuiscontemporary.com/gallery/>.)

<sup>41</sup> Barboza, "Artists' Indignation."

“owns, in whole or in part, or has economic interest equivalent to an ownership interest, in all lots in this sale.”<sup>42</sup>

The announcement of the impending Sotheby’s auctions drew cries of outrage from all corners of the art world who had been touched by the Estella project. The Louisiana and Israel Museums both expressed dismay that they had not been informed of the plans to sell the collection, claiming that they would not have exhibited the works had they known. Dr. Erickson also claims to have been misled about the nature of the collectors, stating that, “I believed that it was a personal collection being assembled for the long term, with perhaps some pieces to be donated to museums.”<sup>43</sup> The bitterest sentiments, however, have been expressed by artists whose works were in the collection, often surrendered to Goedhuis at below-market value in support of the ambitious collection that they assumed would remain in the public domain. The painter He Sen said, “Many artists, including me, were convinced by [Goedhuis], gave our best works to Michael, some even at a relatively cheap price. Then it turned out to be an auction, we feel sold out by him.”<sup>44</sup> He also noted that one work that was purchased for the Estella collection for \$60,000 sold at the Hong Kong auction for \$200,000. Another artist, Feng

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<sup>42</sup> Seemingly unaware of the newly exposed irony of the collection’s name, Goedhuis disclosed that he capriciously took the name from the beautiful but heartbreakingly unfeeling female lead character in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* because “I felt it was a name the Chinese could pronounce... Although Estella wasn’t a pretty character, it’s a pretty name,” (Michael Goedhuis, quoted in Carol Vogel, “Contemporary Chinese on Sale in Hong Kong,” *The New York Times*, 28 March 2008, 30); Britta Erickson, Hou Hanru and Frances Bowles, *China Onward: The Estella Collection: Chinese Contemporary Art, 1966-2006* (Humblebæk, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2007); Lim, “Records, Disappointments”; “Sotheby’s Auctions First Part of Estella Collection... For \$17.8 Million,” *ArtKnowledgeNews.com* 11 April 2008, accessed 1 May 2008, [http://www.artknowledgenews.com/Sothebys\\_Hong\\_Kong\\_Estella\\_Collection.html](http://www.artknowledgenews.com/Sothebys_Hong_Kong_Estella_Collection.html); Erickson, quoted in Barboza, “Artists’ Indignation.”

<sup>43</sup> Barboza, “Disjointed Noses.”

<sup>44</sup> He Sen, quoted in Barboza, “Disjointed Noses.”

Zhengjie, said plainly, “I feel cheated,” noting that his works were auctioned for 5 to 10 times the price paid by Goedhuis.<sup>45</sup>

The story of the formation, canonization, and profitable public dismantling of the Estella collection raises many questions about what, if anything, these art world dealings in Mainland Chinese art have to do with China itself. The story is global in scope: New York investors decide to form a collection of art from mainland China, so they engage a European art world insider to make it happen, American and Chinese scholars to write about the works, and then they exhibit the collection in Europe and the Middle East before selling the whole thing to a New York dealer working in collaboration with one of the world’s largest international auction houses. The buyers at the Hong Kong auction, from what little information is made public, seem to be foreigners and overseas Chinese residing in the U.S, Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong.<sup>46</sup> While the story of the Estella collection seems to be as much about New York as it is about Beijing, an examination of the current expansion of the Chinese domestic art market, specifically the auction market, suggests China will not be left out of the global boom in Chinese art, and begs the question of how much of a role the market plays in the relationship between artists and the state.

### **Dissent and the Artist in Contemporary China**

The success of the Chinese contemporary art market over the past ten years has helped pave the way for drastic changes in that nation’s cultural landscape. Beijing and Shanghai are now home to multiple gallery districts and contemporary art museums.

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<sup>45</sup> Feng Zhengjie, quoted in Barboza, “Artists’ Indignation.”

<sup>46</sup> “Chinese Art Continues to Soar,” “Sotheby’s Auctions First Part of Estella Collection.”

The Dashanzi Art District, home to the 798 Art Zone, is China's most conspicuous example of the thriving contemporary arts economy. This art complex, housed in a former Soviet-era heavy equipment factory compound in the far northeastern corner of the city, is now a mix of art galleries, restaurants, design-oriented retail stores, fashion boutiques, and creative services firms. Beginning with its inhabitation by artists in need of studio space in the early 2000s, this area has evolved steadily into a mainstream tourist attraction as more institutional and commercial venues establish themselves. Given the extremely high profile status of contemporary art in China, especially oil painting, it is reasonable to wonder whether the upbeat and trendy atmosphere at places like 798 is an indicator of waning governmental regulation in the arts. And along these lines, is this relaxation of regulation due to the diminishing power of state cultural organizations in the face of a new arts infrastructure resulting from an overall societal shift toward an independent, market-driven culture? As can be seen on a cursory visit to 798 or its slightly edgier neighbor Caochangdi, or 55 Moganshan Lu in Shanghai, to name a few places, global contemporary art idioms in all media have been well incorporated into Chinese art practices. This contemporary art "scene," often defined through the work of the painters whose works formed the bulk of the Estella Collection, has been celebrated in the global art world since the 1990s. It has received attention from a sympathetic international audience largely for its assumed anti-authoritarian message and the attendant triumph of independent artistic expression in the face of a repressive political environment. The art historical treatment of this branch of Chinese art is not unlike the Cold War era celebration of Abstract Expressionist painting as emblematic of liberal American values.<sup>47</sup> This type of unofficial oil painting certainly carries both implicit and

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<sup>47</sup> For more on this topic, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism*,

explicit criticisms of modern and contemporary China in its style and content. There is a well-established international market for oil painting with generalized admonitory content, but what does this mean for the significant abstract and indirect admonitory work that was also created during the Reform Era?

In the following chapters, I will argue that a different type of non-explicit critical messages levied directly at China's intelligentsia and government were couched within examples of early experimentation in the non-academic art mediums of installation, video, and performance. This is part of a legacy of critical admonishment that comprised an integral part of Confucian literati painting – a tradition that was quietly preserved in China's academic realms despite the clearly anti-Confucian intellectual movements that dominated intellectual discourse throughout the twentieth century. This Reform Era artistic experimentation that charted new visual and aesthetic territory was the result of the discursive intellectual environment of the 1980s, mediated by the curriculum and extra-curricular resources at the nation's most elite official art academies. It is in these academies that the legacies of the scholar-literatus-critic and the Modern artist were fused amidst the strict curriculum designed to teach the technical skills of realist painting through a combination of Beaux-Arts and Socialist Realist traditions. This lineage is crucial not just to understanding the work of Zhang Peili, Wu Shanzhuan, and Zhang Huan, but to understand that the adoption of new media art in non-Western contexts is not evidence of a post-modern globalized artistic convergence, but rather of the conceptual adaptation of cultural specificity. With this in mind one can begin to analyze how, in contemporary China, despite the massive cultural and economic reforms, there remains a persistent, tense, and terpsichorean relationship between artists and the state.

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*Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).



Kantian-infused pedagogy and its new relationship to traditional Chinese culture defined the investigations of modernity and nationalism in China's new academies in the early twentieth century. The fusing of official political ideology and the professionalization artistic training redefined the role of the Chinese artist in the mid-twentieth century. These are necessary pre-conditions for the purposeful side-stepping of official art mediums in the 1980s. By exploring the elements of each of these periods at play in Reform Era cultural policy, I will analyze the meaningful de-coupling of art and official ideology and the reinsertion of the Chinese artist's role as a cultural critic and scholar-amateur in early experimental new media work.

## Chapter 2

### **Eremites, Hermeneutics, Alienation, and Art Academies in the Twentieth Century**

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Xu Bing's statement about the "undigestable" overabundance of informal reading groups in Reform Era China highlights the hermeneutical role that artists took on while the nation renegotiated its intellectual sphere with respect to the party-state in the 1980s. These forums for the discussion and debate of Western and Chinese philosophies included new journals such as *Art Trends* (*Meishu Sichao*, 美术思潮), and revamped editorial staff for older journals, like the appointment of young artists and scholars at *Fine Arts* (*Meishu*, 美术), published by the official Chinese Artists' Association. Along with the policy-driven ebbs and flows of intellectual freedom during the 1980s, these societies and journals' editorial policies reflected an initial sense of hope and optimism followed by a more critical view of the nation's future. This analytical and often pessimistic stance must be understood not as an amalgamation of personal viewpoints but as a generational episteme, eremitic in nature, pedagogically encouraged by the elite academies.

For 1980s intellectuals in the realm of the humanities and sciences, earlier phases of elite withdrawal from political life and veiled governmental criticism found in Song, Tang, and Jin Dynasty poetry and philosophy were re-imagined, resonating powerfully with their contemporaneous Deng Era intellectual culture. Art schools, rebuilt in the post-Cultural Revolution Era, became part of the new academic humanities infrastructure. Revived along with these institutions were the Chinese traditions of

incorporating scholar-artists into the intelligentsia. Examples of artists as close confidants of political leaders had been found in both imperial and Republican China. Notably, the Huizong emperor (r. 1101-1126) of the Song dynasty was himself a noted painter and surrounded himself with literati artist-courtiers like Wang Shen, Chao Ling-jiang, and Chao Shih-lei.<sup>48</sup>

In early twentieth century Republican China, the Cantonese painter Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), who considered himself a scholar in the tradition of Confucian literati, was an active participant in the underground revolutionary efforts of the Alliance Society (*Tongmenghui*, 同盟会), predecessor of the Guomindang (Kuomintang, KMT) party. This society, formed in 1905 in Tokyo, was a conglomeration of revolutionary groups comprised of Chinese students and scholars studying at Japanese universities.<sup>49</sup> Led by Sun Yat-sen, these Chinese elites contributed to assassinations and military maneuvers to overthrow the Qing dynasty in 1911. In the year of the revolution, Gao briefly served as the military governor of Guangdong province, then resigned his political posts in order to return to his art work.<sup>50</sup> Gao's resignation does not fall in the tradition of scholars who retreat from politics as a form of protest, but rather as a new kind of modern professional artist who needed to balance his political convictions with his practical career as a painter, bookseller, and publisher.<sup>51</sup> He was recalled to military duty in the late 1910s and early

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<sup>48</sup> James Cahill, *The Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Jerome Ch'en, *China and the West: Society and Culture, 1815-1937* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979), 307.

<sup>50</sup> Ralph C. Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906-1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 63.

<sup>51</sup> Gao's own education as an artist, prior to the establishment of modern art schools in China, was an amalgamation of traditional and modern modes. He apprenticed in the painting studio of Ju Lian (1828-1904), who worked primarily in the bird and flower genre, until 1898, then studied Western painting under a French artist known by the Chinese name Mai La at Guangdong Christian College in 1903 before traveling to Japan to study Japanese painting in 1905. (Deborah Nash, "Gao Jianfu," In *Grove Art Online*,

1920s to help the Nationalist army retake cities that had been seized by warlords, and after this service remained politically active in Sun Yat-sen's government as a member of the Guangdong Industrial Art Commission and the head of the Provincial Industrial School.<sup>52</sup> The example of Gao Jianfu is important to young Chinese art students in the 1980s, but not because of the new Chinese painting (*xin guohua*, 新国画) style that he developed by fusing elements of Western and Japanese brushwork and composition with Chinese ink painting. Instead, his import lies in the versatility of his identity as both an artist and a politically-active member of the elite intelligentsia that fomented an extreme act of admonition – the overthrow of the Qing government and the entire Imperial tradition.

This chapter will explore the important connections between the 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese art academy system founded by Cai Yuanpei, another Nationalist revolutionary reformer, and the centuries-long Confucian tradition of elite intellectual criticism and withdrawal from society. The mode of considered criticism that accompanied these eremitic withdrawals is especially significant with respect to the structural conditions during two periods: the 1930s, when the first generation that came of age in Republican China was studying in the institutions of higher learning set up by Gao Jianfu, Cai Yuanpei, and other Nationalist reformers; and the 1980s, when the nation's academies and universities were re-opened, renovated, and re-imagined amidst sweeping economic reforms and the national recovery from the extreme trauma of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). It is my contention that the sociological and cultural themes of melancholic alienation and withdrawal in the 1980s were founded on pre-Cultural Revolution

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Oxford Art Online, accessed 5 June 2012,  
<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T030631>.

<sup>52</sup> Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China*, 85.

modalities. Withdrawal from political life within the Chinese intelligentsia – in the 1980s as in the 1930s— informed the specific type of exploration of admonitory concepts in new media art that is at the heart of this dissertation. Despite the tenacious persistence of Cai Yuanpei’s Kantian-inspired educational theory in the nation’s art academies after their re-opening in the late 1970s, Chinese artists of the 1980s and 1990s turned to older and more traditional models of the eremitic scholar-artist to articulate their cultural critiques.

### **Art Academies in China**

As with the colonial enterprises that established academies in Latin America and India during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the art academy system in China was in large part based on antecedents in Europe. This was so, despite their creation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, long after the academy’s hold on European art had waned. The Chinese academic curriculum was largely based on a French Beaux-Arts tradition that guided students through a progressive development of fine arts skills from drawing to painting. Drawing classes began with studies of plaster casts of classical Greek sculptures, with later figure-drawing sessions conducted with nude models, although this practice was controversial and deemed lewd by some government officials.<sup>53</sup> Scholars of Indian art training have argued all national art academies are important components of nation building, even in the colonial context, since academies established under colonial rule often remained fairly intact under the new independent national governments.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For more on Liu Haisu and the curricular practices that led to his branding as a “traitor of art,” see Julia F. Andrews, “‘The traitor of art’ and Chinese modernity: Liu Haisu and the nude model controversy,” in *Images in Exchange*, edited by Richard Vinograd (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> For discussions of art academies in India, see: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New “Indian” Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c1850-1920* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922*:

However, unlike their colonial counterparts that had been established in other countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the art academies in China were established in various regions by the Nationalist government of the late 1910s and early 1920s as a key component of the Republic of China's new educational system, with no direct tie to a particular European curriculum. As a result, Chinese academies in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou were first founded on the basis of individual experiences and proclivities of the artists who had traveled to and studied art in Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, and Japan as part of the Republican government's work-study abroad program. This being said, there were certain conventions that were common to all of the art academies. One such practice was the aforementioned copying of plaster casts. This emphasis on first attaining technical competency and graphic skills is not particular to Chinese art schools, but it is worth noting that this foundational educational practice remained consistent despite other ideological changes in academy curriculum.<sup>55</sup> To emphasize, this continuity is visible in the relative unchanged pedagogy during the transition from the Republican era into the early People's Republic Era. Although the plaster busts of classical Greek sculptures were replaced with busts of Mao and Lenin in the 1950s and 1960s, the program in drawing remained virtually unchanged.

To return to the foundation of China's art academy system during the New Culture Movement of the 1920s, we see that the founders were all painters who had spent time in European art academies and private ateliers. In Shanghai the artist Liu Haisu,

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*Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Vinayak Purohit, *Sociology of Art and Politics* (Bombay: Indian Institute of Social Research, 1987); Pushpa Sundar, *Patrons and Philistines: Arts and the State in British India, 1773-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>55</sup> Kao, *Moyching*. "Reforms in education and the beginning of the western style painting movement in China," in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 149-150.

who had studied in Paris, returned to establish the Shanghai Academy of Art as an educational institution infused with the late-19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics of the Impressionists and the centrality of figure painting. Late-19<sup>th</sup> century French painting, the Impressionists, and plein-air landscape painting similarly inspired Lin Fengmian, who was appointed by Cai Yuanpei as the founding director of the Hangzhou Art Academy in 1928.<sup>56</sup> Xu Beihong studied in Germany as well as France, returned to China in 1926, and in 1927 was asked by Cai to head the art department at the National Central University in Nanjing. Xu infused that school's curriculum with his love of history painting and academic realism, tastes that he had cultivated while a student at the Hochschule für den Bildende Künste, the Académie Julian and the Ecole National Supérieur des Beaux-Arts.<sup>57</sup> But these stylistic and aesthetic variations on the theme of European paths to oil painting was only part of a dichotomous educational program that offered students the opportunity to study either Western painting or Chinese ink painting in the tradition of the apprenticeship undertaken by Gao Jianfu in the late nineteenth century. One medium in the curriculum, sculpture, was considered so Western in orientation that there was no "Chinese" path, and the course of study for sculpture majors was also founded in academic drawing. The discussion of style, medium, and genre, however, was quite secondary to the establishment of an overall art education system, given high priority by Cai Yuanpei, the leading educational reformer of Republican China, as will be explored in depth later in this chapter.

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 93.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 69.

It is worth emphasizing that unlike the colonial academies established as an extension of the European tradition of fine arts education on other continents, the Chinese case presents a distinct and unique educational idiom. Cai Yuanpei outlined this overarching educational initiatives in the visual arts, music, and literature in 1917 when he spoke publicly on the topic of “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education.”<sup>58</sup> For Cai, “...religion is invariably constructed as a response to our spiritual functions.”<sup>59</sup> These functions could be categorized as knowledge, will, and emotion, all of which had become intertwined with religion during civilizations’ early developmental stages. The elements of knowledge and will, Cai argued, had separated from religion as societies developed more sophisticated understandings of the natural world, science, law, and moral relativism. Emotion alone, he continued, was the realm that remained bonded to religious thought all over the world, resulting in both positive and negative manifestations: the beautiful art and architecture that accompanies spaces of religious devotion and the extended violent conflicts between the devotees of different faiths. Cai’s utopian vision, therefore, was to decouple the negative societal effects of faith-based emotion by extracting the positive element of aesthetic beauty and making that, rather than religious philosophy, the cornerstone of modern civic life. He also acknowledged the gradual separation of art and religion in most societies, and the constraint that religion places on aesthetics.<sup>60</sup> The Republican societal conversion from religion to an aesthetic literacy and competency involved the broad implementation of Cai’s vision in art

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<sup>58</sup> Cai Yuanpei, “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education,” in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 182.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 183

<sup>60</sup> “After the Renaissance, all forms of art gradually separated from religion and instead valued humanism. Today, therefore, the most magnificent architecture may be found in schools, theaters, and museums, whereas newly constructed churches with aesthetic merit are almost nonexistent. Other kinds of art often take their subjects from natural phenomena or social conditions,” (Cai Yuanpei, “Replacing Religion,” 185).



education as a key component of all Chinese schools. This, in turn, necessitated the training of a significant number of art teachers to staff these positions. China's art academies were thus not simply the institutions that would train the nation's fine artists or underpin creative industries (as with Sir Joshua Reynolds' goals in the founding documents of the Royal Academy of Art in London in 1768).<sup>61</sup> They would be the breeding ground for new kinds of educators who could help to reshape Chinese society.

It is important to understand this facet of the academies' genesis, as it distinguishes their motivation from other art education environments. Rather than merely producing specialized art and culture workers who would populate the elite realm of aesthetic discourse, the academies were designed to produce competent educators at the elementary and secondary school level. This fundamental orientation towards generalized aesthetic education as a path to Republican citizenship was in opposition to the prevailing Modernist conception of the artist as avant-garde, anti-academic, or outside of society that had been encountered by Lin Fengmian, Xu Beihong, and Liu Haisu in Europe. It was also oppositional to the traditional view of the Chinese artist as a scholar-amateur who cultivated his painting, calligraphy, and poetry in a disinterested and certainly non-professional way over a lifetime.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is crucial to understand the ambitious scope of Cai's program, and the democratizing effect he hoped it would have on Republican Chinese society. Criticism of the generally degraded state of the arts in China at the dawn of the Republic and before the implementation of Cai's program was heard from many corners, including the poet Xu Zhimo in 1922:

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<sup>61</sup> Joshua Reynolds and Robert R. Wark, "Discourse I," and "Discourse II," in *Discourses on Art* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (London) Ltd. by Yale University Press, 1997), 13-21 & 25-37.

Painting is another sad story. A dim memory of the fact that we once have seen the vast generous sweeps of Wu Daozi, and the large and subtle compositions of Wang Wei, or, to name a more recent instance, the calm and sure vision of Jin Dongxin, revolts us to think that for many a day, we have seen but at best skillful technicians, sham imitators, and frank humbugs, totally devoid of originality and creative force. And then there are those ninth-rate followers of European methods, who are as puerile in technique as they are void in imagination, worse than the tame practitioners of traditional type in the sense that the latter generally puts you into humor and makes you smile, whereas the former frequently puts you out of humor and excites your sadist complex to distinction [sic].<sup>62</sup>

Cai's design of the nation's art education system to impact a wider audience meant that the academy's students received a skills-based art teacher's education in addition to elements of a liberal arts education. This did not necessarily place the traditional Chinese artist's role as a true master, the kind mourned by Xu Zhimo, or an elite cultural, political and societal critic out of reach of the academy students. It did mean that to become this type of artist would require individual initiative, extra-curricular exploration, and exceptional talent. As the following section will explore, Cai Yuanpei was committed to encouraging plurality, tolerance, and experimental exploration in China's art academies and universities, thus creating the conditions for an elite subset of the academic population to re-engage with the traditional role of the Chinese scholar-artist.

### **The Education Sector, Scholar-Artists and the State: Prolegomena to a Semi-Autonomous Intellectual Sphere in Reform Era China**

Art education in the Reform Era (1978-present) reflects rebuilding and recovering from the institutional instability resulting from disruptions in education and the society as a whole during the twentieth century, most notably during the late 1950s, 1960s, and

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<sup>62</sup> Xu Zhimo, "Art and Life," originally written in English and published in *Creativity Quarterly (Chuangzao Jikan)* 2, no. 1 (1922), anthologized and edited for stylistic change from the original English text in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 170.

early 1970s when schools were closed or under-enrolled during the Great Leap Forward (1957-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). These disruptions corresponded to formative years for the artists of the '85 Art New Wave, most of whom were born in the early 1960s. Discontinuities in the availability of education fundamentally skewed the population attending post-secondary education geographically toward the coastal and northeastern provinces and demographically toward the children of families that had been targeted as bourgeois during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>63</sup>

The reinvigoration of China's education sector and individual intellectuals is an important backdrop for the re-opening of the nation's art academies. Legislation mandating nine years of compulsory free schooling was enacted in 1986, and the percentage of the overall national budget allotted to education almost tripled from 6.8% in 1978 to 18.8% in 1998.<sup>64</sup> This time period covers the schooling of the artists of the '85 Art New Wave including Zhang Peili (Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art class of 1984) and Wu Shanzhuan (Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art class of 1986), and their slightly junior contemporary Zhang Huan (Central Academy of Fine Art class of 1993). For the purposes of this study, this puts China's elite art fine art academies in the context of a domestic economy that was developing rapidly. Not only was education becoming a more robust portion of the national budget, institutions of higher education became the natural home for rehabilitated so-called "rightists" who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution or the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957. At the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the regrouped faculty formed in 1977 included forty-four rightists purged in 1957 and a hundred and twenty-six faculty that had been removed and persecuted during

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<sup>63</sup> Guang Hua Wan, *Inequality and Growth in Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 165.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 166

the Cultural Revolution.<sup>65</sup> These rightists re-introduced elements of liberalism, individualism, and competition that had been purged from artistic production and education during the 1960s and early 1970s. The academies' initial classes upon re-opening in the late 1970s after the Cultural Revolution had been composed primarily of artists born in the 1950s who had worked as propaganda artists during the Cultural Revolution and thus already had a solid technical foundation in Socialist Realism and real life experience. These students received a fairly hands-off education at the academies, which provided studio space and access to a group of peers rather than a formal curriculum for the first few years that it re-opened.<sup>66</sup> Shui Tianzhong (b.1935), an influential art historian and art magazine editor, described the faculty in these very early years of the Reform Era as open-minded, welcoming of foreign influences, and sympathetic to their students' curiosity and new ideas. However, they were still traumatized by their recent experiences and unable to share much of their artistic or personal experiences.<sup>67</sup>

The subsequent generation of students at the academies in the 1980s had been born during the 1960s, and the educational disruptions of the Cultural Revolution had delayed their education. They also came to the academy slightly later in life than other generations of students, although without the professional background of the socialist realist art workers who had populated the art academies in the late 1970s. Still, they were eager and willing to conform to the curricular and non-curricular leadership of their professors who were more prepared to teach once the academies had reconstituted their program a few years into the Reform Era, after the original classes had completed their

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<sup>65</sup> Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 43.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

studies. The 1980s students' generational return to formal schooling came at an interesting time characterized by substantial curricular experimentation and innovation within the traditional university system.<sup>68</sup> This might have been a factor in the widespread interest in extra-curricular “seminars and discussions” mentioned by Xu Bing in the epigraph to this chapter. This type of informal intellectual gathering was certainly part of the overwhelming vitality of the education sector in the Reform Era; it is also a discrete cultural phenomenon in its own right, integral to the development of nonofficial intellectual and artistic spheres.

The evolution of this quasi-autonomous space was one of the most important factors creating the conditions for artistic experimentation in new media. The merging of official and non-official academic environments in the 1980s through the creation of organizations like the Culture Academy in Beijing, founded in 1984, is part of the contemporary Chinese rediscovery of the tradition of local or private academies (*sixue*). This was an important step away from state-led social and educational organizations that had dominated the public landscape for the majority of the People's Republic Era, where even “popular” (*minjian*, 民间) groups that met outside of formal academic institutions were conduits for state organs to disseminate their policies and principles.<sup>69</sup> Neo-Confucian learning and preparation for the civil service examinations in the Qing dynasty had fallen into the categories of *sixue* (私学), private or local academies funded by the students' families and communities, and *guanxue* (官学), the official academies.

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<sup>68</sup> Ruth Hayhoe, *China's Universities, 1895-1995: A Century of Cultural Conflict* (New York: Garland, 1996), 119.

<sup>69</sup> Gordon White, *Riding the Tiger: The Politics of Economic Reform in Post-Mao China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993), 79.

*Guanxue* institutions were the original elite schools that cultivated scholar-officials.<sup>70</sup> *Sixue* were also the domain of the elite scholar-gentry, and tended to gain status during periods when dissenting scholars took issue with the methods of the *guanxue*. Very early twentieth century private institutions like Nanyang, Fudan, and China Colleges, all in Shanghai, were self-consciously branded as modern *gongxue* (public schools) to avoid association with the elite *guanxue* and *sixue* of the past.<sup>71</sup> By the 1980s, however, non-governmental schooling filled a gap that the official government academies could not due to the strict party regulations on education.

The intersection of the intellectual public sphere and the art academy is an important one since student life at these institutions in the 1980s resonated with both the technical and practical education prescribed by educational leaders like Cai Yuanpei in the early days of the Republican Era. A renewed interest in informal study was reminiscent of the study societies (*xuehui*, 学会) of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>72</sup> Both of these episodes in modern Chinese art and aesthetic history and must be considered foundations for the new media explorations by young art academy graduates in the 1980s.

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<sup>70</sup> Xiaoping Cong, *Teachers' Schools and the Making of the Modern Chinese Nation-State, 1897-1937* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 19-20.

<sup>71</sup> Wen-Hsin Yeh, *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937* (Cambridge, Mass: Published by Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University and distributed by Harvard University Press, 1990), 92.

<sup>72</sup> *Xuehui* originated in the late nineteenth century to organize and educate elite Chinese social and intellectual elites to the cause of reform and modernization. These societies, sometimes topical but often general and based on locality, grew and expanded after the founding of the Republic and then increased even more in the 1920s after the initiation of the May Fourth (New Culture) Movement. These associations, many of which began publishing associated journals, were crucial in the development of a non-governmental public sphere and in the expansion of China's publishing industry. (Wang Ke-wen, "Study Societies (*Xuehui*)" in *Modern China An Encyclopedia of History, Culture and Nationalism*, Wang Ke-wen, ed. (New York: Garland, 1998), 335-336.)

## **New Culture Movement Policies and Prescriptions**

1910s and 1920s Republican Era education was constructed around a notion of modernization based on logic, science, and a belief in the fundamental good and moral nature of mankind. During this period of early nationhood, Republican administrators wanted to break ties with Imperial era Confucian education, and thus emphasized mathematics and technical artistic skills.<sup>73</sup> All educational institutions were brought under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, and all curricula were reoriented to emphasize the morality, patriotism, and technical competence. Cai Yuanpei, as the Republic's first Minister of Education, applied Western theories to his vision of modern China by emphasizing the humanistic values drawn from the work of Charles Darwin and Peter Kropotkin.<sup>74</sup> As a result, beginning in 1912, Cai forbade education in Confucian classics at the elementary school level, considering them retrograde and unscientific, and replaced them with practical instruction in drawing and crafts.<sup>75</sup> This dramatic shift was also linked to his interpretation of aesthetics and beauty in the works of Kant and Schiller, eloquently synthesized in his 1917 address to the Shenzhou Scholarly Society, "Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education," as discussed above.<sup>76</sup> Cai understood the cultivation of aesthetic understanding and sensitivity to stimulate a wide-reaching, morally upright worldview:

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<sup>73</sup> Cyrus Henderson Peake, *Nationalism and Education in Modern China* (New York: H. Fertig, 1970), 75.

<sup>74</sup> Interpretations of Darwin's theory of evolution were prominent and ubiquitous in Republican Era educational systems. Cai Yuanpei's predilection for the theory of evolution was both because of its usefulness in scientific research and the radical social impact that the theory had around the world, providing a new scientific basis for a modern view of all biological and social phenomena. Cai was similarly drawn to the Russian anarchist Kropotkin's late nineteenth century work *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* as an optimistic corollary to Darwin's theories. *Mutual Aid* used scientific research on Siberian ecosystems to proclaim that despite competition and struggle for limited resources, organismic cooperation is the real key to species thriving and surviving. This theory became one of the keystones of Cai's educational policy throughout the 1910s and 1920s that emphasized national unity above all.

<sup>75</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ts'ai Yuan-P'ei, Educator of Modern China* (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 47.

<sup>76</sup> Cai Yuanpei, "Replacing Religion," 182-189.

What cultivates our emotions in pure aesthetic education is that it produced pure and lofty habits and gradually eliminates selfishness and the concept of benefiting ourselves through harming others.... If beauty is universal, there cannot exist within it the consciousness of ourselves as differentiated from other people.<sup>77</sup>

He concretized this belief with the implementation of universal art education, taken to mean practical hands-on skills-building. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to understand this early twentieth century educational policy as it affected the college students of the 1930s, who would go on to hold senior administrative positions in the educational institutions of the early Reform Era. Cai and other educational reformers of the New Culture Movement were born in the late nineteenth century and represented the last generation of Confucian-educated scholars and the first generation to study Western theories abroad. To them, China's future as a modern nation could be engineered only by the implementation of educational policies that would teach students to value democracy and science. Their utopian hopes for sweeping change were firmly imprinted upon the next generation who were well versed in Darwinian theories and aesthetic principles, but the students themselves did not mirror the optimism of the New Culture Movement. Instead, they were characterized by a generational malaise and sense of alienation. Brought on by the political machinations of competing factions within the Republican government that sought to manipulate student political groups as well as the isolation that urban college students felt from their families and hometowns, the dissatisfaction felt by the generation that came of age during the Guomindang's Nanjing Decade (1927-1937) led to a powerful re-consideration of the trope of the hermit-scholar.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.



### **College Students of the Nanjing Decade and their imprint on the 1980s**

There are important resonances between the '85 Art New Wave and the student movements during the early twentieth century since many of the senior scholars and administrators in China in the 1980s were themselves college students during the late 1920s and 1930s. Key figures include: the linguist Wang Li who taught at Beijing University until his death in 1986; Jiang Nanxiang, Minister of Education from 1979 to 1982 (who remained an active member of the Communist Party's Central Committee throughout the 1980s); and Hu Sheng, the party historian and theoretician who served as the president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences from 1985 to 1998. The missing generation of professors in their 40s that would have been educated during the Cultural Revolution meant that the faculty profile at many universities skewed older than the traditional age distribution.<sup>78</sup> In addition to this imbalance, many promising young faculty who graduated with advanced degrees immediately after the Cultural Revolution were attracted to non-academic careers with new private companies (either Chinese or joint ventures with foreign investors) or left China for careers abroad.<sup>79</sup>

The creation and oversight of many journals and study societies in the Reform Era can thus be better understood with respect to the generation that came of age during the Nanjing Decade. As historian Wen-Hsin Yeh has explored in her work *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937*, the Nanjing Decade was a crucial time in the development of modern institutions of higher learning in China, when despite the academic orientation toward modernization and scientific progress, many students at this time experienced a sense of alienation, a socio-cultural phenomenon that

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Agelasto and Bob Adamson, *Higher Education in Post-Mao China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), 178.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

will be discussed further. This was the historic moment when colleges and universities truly distanced themselves from Confucian *guanxue* academies and implemented modern courses of study in science and engineering. Several colleges also began to conduct some of these classes in English, and intense intellectual debates regarding Chinese culture and artistic lineage were intertwined with discussions of philology and phonology.<sup>80</sup>

The location of these issues of national cultural identity in the realm of linguistics is part of the overall collapsing of humanities, social sciences, and the arts into one complex conversation on the overall state of academics in China as a calculus of traditional, modern, and Western influences. These conversations mingled the prevailing interest in promoting empirical methods of Western science in all disciplines, with the examination of Qing and Ming philologists for their rigorous and methodical analysis of classical texts. Scholars thus engaged the language of modernity as a means for reinserting otherwise out-of-favor Confucian texts like the *Shui Jing (Classic of the Waterways)* into the college curriculum.<sup>81</sup> It is unsurprising, then that the college students at this time, guided by the heavily literary faculty of China's universities became comfortable with the hybridization of traditional Chinese philosophy and Western social science. It is also unsurprising that the students of the 1930s, separated from their traditional social support networks by the modern urban education system that the New Culture Movement had put in place, were drawn to themes of alienation and isolation as found in both traditional Chinese texts and modern Western theories. For example Zhu Guangqian (1897-1986), a professor of philosophy at Beijing University and the acknowledged founder of the study of aesthetics in China, observed his students in the

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<sup>80</sup> Yeh, *The Alienated Academy*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

1930s as moral and noble-minded, but also easily swayed and lacking a sense of confidence about their own futures as well as the future of the Republic. According to Zhu, the Nanjing Decade generation was philosophically unmoored and easily changed, “as if infected with an emotional malaria.”<sup>82</sup>

While it is unreasonable to assert that the Nanjing Decade generation was uniformly and consistently disillusioned, it is important to note that they generally felt an obligation to be dissatisfied and unhappy and were quite influenced by faculty who highlighted the malaise of scholars throughout Chinese history. As college students in a time of political upheaval, they felt a certain moral imperative to adopt the melancholy stance of literati figures. One often-cited precedent for the behavior that Yeh describes as, “...a moral imperative to feel despondent when times were bad,”<sup>83</sup> was the endowed charitable estate of the Fan clan, established by the Confucian philanthropist and Song scholar-statesman Fan Zhongyan (989-1052).<sup>84</sup> Fan Zhongyan was quite often referenced during the Nanjing Decade for his insistence on the duties of the literati class to practice self-denial and dedicate themselves to the problems of society at large. As quoted by Liu Yizheng (1880-1956), a history professor at Dongnan University in Nanjing and editor of the influential journal *Xueheng* (*Critical Review*, 学衡), in his 1922 article “On the Responsibility of University Students”, Fan asserts that the educated class should be, “the first to worry about the troubles of the world, but the last to enjoy its pleasures.”<sup>85</sup> This appeal to students to rediscover the Confucian scholars’ duties to “the world” was both a

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Denis Twitchett, “The Fan Clan’s Charitable Estate: 1050-1760,” in *Confucianism in Action*, eds. David S. Nivison and Arthur F. Wright (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1959), 97-133.

<sup>85</sup> Michel Hockx and Kirk A. Denton, *Literary Societies of Republican China* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 161.

call to action and an affirmation that a scholar's professed dissatisfaction with the state of the world was itself an important intellectual contribution.

The journal *Xueheng* was organized by scholars opposed to the reformist Doubting Antiquity School (D.A.S.) of Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Gu Jiegang (1893-1980) associated with the New Culture Movement. *Xueheng's* editorial staff included the aforementioned Liu Yizheng, a classically trained Confucian scholar who came of age at the end of the Qing dynasty, and a group of Harvard-educated scholars affiliated with the humanist Irving Babbitt.<sup>86</sup> It is critical to understand that the Confucianism revived by the *Xueheng* group was not conservative or reactionary, but rather an alternative modernist challenge to the generically reform-minded D.A.S. *Xueheng* published articles on classical Chinese, classical Western, and comparative historical and literary topics from 1922-1933, and in so doing provided a picture of Confucian China as a site of early cosmopolitanism and an admirable source of a particularly Chinese modernity. This was an important periodical in that it countered the dominant narrative proposed by Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and the editors of *Xin Qingnian* (*New Youth* or *La Jeunesse*, 新青年) that insisted upon the active refusal of Confucian scholarship in favor of vernacularization on the one hand, and the introduction of Western theories of science and democracy on the other.

Another Confucian figure that received attention from college students in the 1930s was Qu Yuan (329 BCE - 299 BCE), an exiled poet and scholar of the Warring States Period who committed suicide to protest his kingdom's corruption. It is by no means unusual that Qu Yuan should receive attention during the confused Nanjing Decade, as he was a perennial symbol of unwavering morality among Chinese scholars

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<sup>86</sup> Tze-Ki Hon, "Cultural Identity and Local Self-Government: A Study of Liu Yizheng's History of Chinese Culture," *Modern China*, 30, no. 4 (2004): 513; Shuang Shen, *Cosmopolitan Publics: Anglophone Print Culture in Semi-Colonial Shanghai* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 49.

throughout the Imperial period and was brought forward seamlessly into the twentieth century.<sup>87</sup> What is interesting to note are the subsequent, near-simultaneous, readings of Qu's martyrdom as a clarion call for the New Culture Movement's energetic iconoclasm and the disenchanting melancholy of the students of the Nanjing Decade who had grown up in the Republic of China. The chaos of constant political turmoil and competing notions of modernization and reform had devolved into partisan rivalry and left the nation ill-equipped to deal with a growing military threat from Japan.

Other figures from dynastic China that received attention from students during the Nanjing Decade were the Tang poet Li Bai (705-762), whose poems often featured an eremitic traveler passing through the universe unmoored; the philosopher and literary figure Zhuangzi (369 BCE - 286 BCE), who dreamt he was a butterfly only to awake and realize he himself might be the subject of a butterfly's dream; and the Three Kingdoms Period warlord-poet Cao Cao (155-220), who wrote often about the brevity of life and the ephemeral nature of beauty.<sup>88</sup> The 1930s was thus a time of philosophical reinvention and literary revisitation, not of Confucian morals *per se* but of the possible application of Confucian moralism to the problems of a modern society.

Similarly, the prevalence of Darwinian theories of evolution in students' primary, secondary, and post-secondary education and the increasing presence of social Darwinism in intellectual debates of the time gave rise to yet another interpretation of Qu Yuan. Students interpolated Qu Yuan's suicide as evidence that morality and heroism made one ill-equipped to survive in a fundamentally corrupt human society. As asserted

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<sup>87</sup> Ralph C. Croizier, "Qu Yuan and the Artists: Ancient Symbols and Modern Politics in the Post-Mao Era," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* no. 24 (1990): 25-50, reprinted in *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Jonathan Unger, (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

<sup>88</sup> Yeh, *The Alienated Academy* 249.

by Wen-Hsin Yeh, a historian of early twentieth century China, the student generation of the 1930s had:

...through a combination of philosophical melancholy, political disillusionment, cultural iconoclasm, and scientific materialism... arrived at a profound weariness with nearly *all* sociopolitical formulations that involved power and authority, accompanied by a general skepticism towards a wide range of human endeavor.<sup>89</sup>

The generational weariness that Yeh describes might be better understood with respect to the legacy of student political activism in 1920s China. Originally spontaneous and genuine in the years following the 1919 May Fourth Movement, it had become much less authentic by the 1930s.<sup>90</sup> By this time, the Nationalist government was firmly in power and had both introduced mandatory political training and inserted non-student political leaders in the universities' student clubs.<sup>91</sup> The elite college students of the 1930s met this canned political consciousness with skepticism and ennui, opting out of public political life altogether and instead retreating in the manner of their eremitic dynastic counterparts. As conveyed in the trope of the impoverished hermit scholar fisherman depicted by Wu Zhen, the retreat from contemporary political activism was a form of moral admonition by abstaining from the corrupt world of politics. In the 1930s, however, the retreat was not into a natural setting, but into the university.

The legacy of these attitudes of the students of the Nanjing Decade is not perpetual cynicism, however. Rather than collapsing altogether, prior grassroots activity

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 253.

<sup>90</sup> The terms May Fourth Movement and New Culture Movement are often used interchangeably to refer to the period of cultural reform in the 1910s and 1920s oriented towards redefining and modernizing Chinese culture by applying scientific and democratic principles. It is important, however, to distinguish the elite cultural and intellectual overtones of the general New Culture Movement, and the political character of the May Fourth Movement. The latter movement was initiated on May Fourth, 1919, to protest the weak Nationalist government and its inadequate response to China's embarrassing treatment in the Treaty of Versailles whereby German colonial possessions in Shandong province were transferred to Japan rather than returned to China. Where the New Culture Movement had its roots in late nineteenth century Qing reform movements initiated by the intelligentsia, the May Fourth Movement was initiated by university students and aimed to recruit a broad, populist base to the cause.

<sup>91</sup> Yeh, *The Alienated Academy*, 230.

encouraged openness to a multiplicity of modern worldviews. These included Confucian and other traditional Chinese academic sources that had been largely discounted by the dominant New Culture Movement. By the 1970s and 1980s, many of these Nanjing Decade students were senior officials who had been biding their time until Deng-era academic policy, when they were able to reshape of the post-secondary education system in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. Hu Sheng (1918-2000), a student of Zhu Guangqian at Beijing University in the 1930s, was one such figure whose connection to the Nanjing Decade later became salient. As a senior undergraduate student in 1937, Hu had undertaken a catalog of his fellow students' prevailing outlooks and came up with four main categories: nihilism, hedonism, fatalism, and pessimism.<sup>92</sup> It is hardly surprising that a scholar who came of age while analyzing the ambiguous social and academic tendencies of his classmates became an administrator known for his inconsistency toward hot-button issues like "bourgeois liberalization". In his own research, Hu focused on modern Chinese history, specifically that of the Chinese Communist Party, a history he witnessed firsthand beginning in 1949 when he worked for the party's theoretical research and publicity departments. By 1975, at tail end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping brought Hu into the Political Study Office, an influential think tank that aimed to undercut the influence of the Gang of Four.<sup>93</sup> Hu's presence in the upper administration of the Party was tied to Deng's return from being purged. As Deng rose to power, Hu became an editor of the journal *Red Flag* (*Hongqi*, 红旗), an academic publication of the Central Committee of the CPC, and a senior member and eventually president of the Reform Era institution the Chinese Academy of

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>93</sup> David Michael Finkelstein and Maryanne Kivlehan, *China's Leadership in the 21st Century: The Rise of the Fourth Generation* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 153.

Social Sciences (CASS) from 1985-1998. Hu's leadership at CASS took a variety of theoretical positions, linked to the shifting political leanings of the times. In 1986 he upheld the trend toward reformist liberalization, and argued for freedom in all realms of academic research.<sup>94</sup> He published these thoughts in *Red Flag*, declaring that there were no forbidden areas of research in the social sciences, and that the Party should not take official stances on areas of academic controversy. Most notably, he called for the Party to allow research in areas that did not directly involve the conscious application of Marxism and to encourage the study of history for history's sake without direct correspondence to contemporary political affairs.<sup>95</sup> He also went so far as to encourage openness to "bourgeois" research, posing the question, "Can we not also learn something from the harmonious movements in certain fields of the capitalist society?"<sup>96</sup>

Hu's position at CASS allowed him to set the tone for much academic research and publication in general, including artistic production in the academies throughout the 1980s. But Hu's reform-minded proclamations, given in 1986 on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Hundred Flowers Movement at the Sixth Party Plenum, were leveraged at the same meeting, where an official CPC proclamation announced a shift back towards a commitment to purer Marxism.<sup>97</sup> Following this plenum, Hu proclaimed that Marxism should, in fact, be the guiding principle in academic research, and that equal value could not be assigned to competing schools of thought. He did, however,

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<sup>94</sup> Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner, *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS): Shaping the Reforms, Academia and China (1977-2003)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 79.

<sup>95</sup> Clifford Edmunds, "The Politics of Historiography: Jian Bozan's Historicism," in *China's Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship*, eds. Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek, and Carol Lee Hamrin (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1987), 99.

<sup>96</sup> Sleeboom-Faulkner, *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, 79.

<sup>97</sup> Held in September 1986, the Sixth Plenum of the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress resolved against "bourgeois liberalization" and "spiritual pollution," signaling a gradual end to the liberal atmosphere of the Beijing Spring of 1984-1985.



maintain his position that the nation required robust research in the social sciences in order to combat “spiritual pollution,” and encouraged scholars to “change the self-seclusion of research work in the past, and to boldly import academic ideas from all countries in the world” while still maintaining the party line that Marxism needed to be employed in all intellectual inquiry.<sup>98</sup> This somewhat contradictory position can be read with respect to the coded language in which many of the intellectual discussions of his youth were conducted whereby Chinese philology and phonology were discussed in place of more overtly political topics. While publicly aligning himself with Party directives, Hu had long ago witnessed the flexibility necessary for an academic to survive in the tenuous political environments of twentieth century China. Furthermore, if we are to believe that he himself absorbed some of his generation’s disillusionment, it can be assumed that he also maintained a healthy skepticism of party reforms and that he saw his administrative role as that of an interlocutor between bureaucrat and intellectual – satisfying and educating the former while encouraging or cautioning the latter.

It is my contention that the fluidity of Hu’s politically tinged academic policies throughout the 1980s is linked to the social and intellectual environments of his college days in the 1930s. Many scholars who came of age during the Nanjing Decade, like Hu, were profoundly affected by the political turmoil of their youth and remained open to foreign theories and Confucian sources that were held in suspicion by the Party’s Central Committee. In particular, Hu’s own scholarship had revealed both the appropriation of traditional Confucian intellectual exploration and the artistic themes of melancholy and alienation – key elements in the intellectual formation of the Nanjing Decade generation. The continuing influence of this generation is thus important to our understanding of

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<sup>98</sup> Sleeboom-Faulkner, *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, 94, note 61.

intellectual and artistic freedom and experimentation in the Reform Era, for several reasons. First, the preservation and resurrection of Confucian and traditional Chinese learning was limited to the universities and academies of the Reform Era. These institutions thus served as environments where the Party's policies and directives were muted by the goals of "research," as had been the rule with college campuses in the 1930s – the site of individuals' personal exploration rather than political engagement. Second, this public declaration of the importance of learning from bourgeois Western and traditional Chinese sources even after the retreat in 1986 implied an apolitical approach to academic study, similar to the dominance of the scientific method in 1930s intellectual discourse.

### **Artistic and Intellectual Autonomy in the Semi/Public Sphere of the 1980s**

The "Beijing Spring," as China's early Reform Era is known, particularly the years 1978-1979, has been described as a thawing, awakening, and emerging from hibernation. Extending the seasonal metaphor, the 1980s have been described as a time of intellectual flowering. These terms have been applied largely to the nation's economy and political relationships with the outside world, but neither opening would have been possible without the simultaneous reinvigoration of China's domestic cultural realm. It is in this realm that the artists at the heart of our investigation must be situated. Although scholars' discussions of China's intellectuals of this era have largely focused on writers and to a lesser extent scientists, this dissertation argues that artists were primary agents in the reworking of culture at this time. I thus include artists in the group branded "cultural intellectuals" by the political scientist Edward X. Gu, who by this term refers to thinkers who concerned themselves with large questions pertaining to humanity writ large

regardless of disciplinary boundaries.<sup>99</sup> These intellectuals found themselves in uncertain territory as they sprung free of the planned economic system that had formerly given them an official work-unit assignment. Where this development would lead, however, was completely unclear, and the first efforts to carve out new autonomous intellectual and economic realms were tentative and nonlinear.

The general liberalization and reform in the academic and cultural arenas encouraged by Hu Sheng and CASS in the mid-1980s has been well documented as the phenomenon of “Culture Fever,” (*wenhua re*, 文化热).<sup>100</sup> This loosely defined and pervasive cultural development was nonofficial and private in the tradition of *sixue*. This phenomenon was initiated by the scholars themselves, yet initially it had the tacit approval of the Party’s administrators. The main theme of intellectual exploration fostered a re-examination of Chinese traditional culture and non-Marxist Western theories as a means to create an alternative set of ideologies with which to leverage the official Party line: orthodox Marxist-Leninist and Mao Zedong Thought. The new ideas resonated with the Party’s experimental economic reforms, and as such did not constitute an oppositional movement despite their nonofficial nature. Newly formed organizations and institutions usually maintained an affiliation with official and mainstream institutions due to the lack of non-official funding and the reliance upon official infrastructures.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, Culture Fever in China was a rich and productive period, and a proliferation of magazines, book series, and other intellectual publications emerged in the

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<sup>99</sup> Edward X. Gu, “Cultural Intellectuals and the Politics of the Cultural Public Space in Communist China (1979-1989),” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (May 1999): 390.

<sup>100</sup> See Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1996); and Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>101</sup> Gu, “Cultural Intellectuals,” 390.

early- to mid-1980s. Non-governmental educational organizations and think tanks as well as private academies began to crop up in the academic realm. The founding of these institutions was linked to the overall interest in rediscovering and rehabilitating a Chinese academic lineage. Specifically, the tradition of *sixue*, as it had been developed during the Tang and Song dynasties, was actively revived as a traditional institutional model. Thus, new 1980s institutions like the Culture Academy, an adult education institution founded by philosophy professors from Beijing University, were created with the Tang and Song models in mind: institutions that were pluralistic compared to the official *guanxue* academies that followed prescribed orthodoxy.<sup>102</sup> The founders of the Culture Academy also looked to dynastic models in order to secure funding and support for their nascent institution by employing the practice of *shangshu* (上书) – submitting written requests to high officials for patronage.<sup>103</sup> This reveals both historical sensitivity and political savvy on the part of the professors, as Deng Xiaoping and Party Chairman Hu Yaobang had spoken extensively in the early Reform Era about the need for the nation’s intellectuals to provide leadership in implementing the Four Modernizations: agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. These areas of modernization had been promoted since the 1960s as the means by which China could become economically self-reliant and globally significant. While the Culture Academy did not pretend to fulfill the specific areas identified in the four modernizations, the professors knew that their status as intellectuals, many of them senior authorities in their fields, was a valuable affiliation for the Party. The Culture Academy group thus applied the technique of *shangshu* by writing directly to Hu Yaobang, with immediate results in the form of funding and endorsement

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

despite their continuing nonofficial status.<sup>104</sup> The Party of the Reform Era was thus implicated in the support of humanities and social sciences (essentially “superstructure” with respect to strict Marxist doctrine) in addition to economic and social development.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is imperative to understand that the general development of independent academies and publications in the intellectual realm was equally present in the art world. Artists were among the cultural intellectuals that participated in Culture Fever. Artists associated with the '85 New Art Wave were prolific in the realm of self-publishing, but were equally invested in the re-invigoration of China's official print media channels. This negotiation of various kinds of cultural public space is consistent with the efforts from many different intellectual sectors that were by necessity reliant upon official publications because of the state funding that made these periodicals viable.

The revolutionary nature of these quasi-official and nonofficial publications should be considered with respect to the history of publishing in modern China. Shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic, all publications came under the supervision of the centralized State Publication Bureau in Beijing.<sup>105</sup> While the semi-official and nonofficial publications initiated by cultural intellectuals in the 1980s were indulged, it should be noted that it was technically illegal to purchase or own photoduplication technology, short or long-wave radio equipment, or other means of producing and distributing print or broadcast media. Some private publishing initiatives were the subject of harassment by officials, and in some cases, these publishing houses

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Zhengyuan Fu, *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 229.

were shut down, often on the grounds that they were distributing pornography.<sup>106</sup> The freedom to publish or distribute works was thus highly constrained, despite the general trends of reform and liberalization that allowed for the blossoming of a print media culture that accompanied the Beijing Spring.

Members of the New Wave contributed to official publications like the Chinese Artists' Association's magazine *Fine Arts (Meishu)* as well, which reflected an editorial reorganization that embraced the avant-garde.<sup>107</sup> One exception to the rule that stable and professional periodicals were state-funded was the weekly publication *Fine Arts in China (Zhongguo Meishu Bao, 中国美术报)*, published from 1985 to 1989. This was a privately financed publication that was given official endorsement, perhaps the most important forum for communication among artists groups and societies from around the country. Published out of the China Arts Research Academy, *Fine Arts in China* aimed to present a "scientific" and balanced report of the "conflicts and controversies of the art world."<sup>108</sup> In so doing, it acted as a chronicle of the weekly events taking place across the country, as well as a forum for exploring sensitive or controversial media or subject matter in the spirit of disinterested reporting.

The presence of provocative editorial content in official publications like *Art* and *Fine Arts in China* was possible in the mid- to late-1980s while China's intellectual establishment underwent a process of re-institutionalization. That is, the intellectual public sphere was self-consciously re-creating itself after almost complete destruction. Individuals who had been publicly criticized and in some cases exiled during the Cultural

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Martina Köppel-Yang, "Appendix: A Nationwide Forum and Model: Art Magazines and Symposia," in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 47.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, note 21.

Revolution found themselves rehabilitated and placed in positions of authority in the reconfigured university structure, while young scholars found themselves given the opportunity to take on leadership roles in official organizations. The intellectuals in such an environment were understandably cautious – they took only tentative steps to define this new institutionalism in a manner that would give voice to a wide range of intellectuals, including those who operated outside of the official circuits. One such unofficial group was the Pond Society, an organization of young graduates in the shadow of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts founded in Hangzhou in 1985. Before examining them, it is necessary to understand the role of the Chinese Artists' Association and other official organs of the Chinese art world at this time.

### **The Chinese Artists' Association and Art in the Official Sphere**

The Chinese Artists' Association (*Zhongguo Meishujia Xiehui*, 中国美术家协会), like other voluntary but exclusive professional associations in the arts as well as the world of academia, is a party-state-affiliated organization that falls under the Department of Propaganda and is funded by the Ministry of Culture. The corresponding departments of the provincial party committees supervise provincial branches of this organization.<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, the large-scale reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 stressed professionalism over ideology, so the status of artists and academics was significantly raised, and the role of the Chinese Artists' Association became one of facilitation more than supervision. This allowed for the conditions that permitted avant-garde experimentation within official channels of education, exhibition, and publication.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Fu, *Autocratic Tradition*, 228.

<sup>110</sup> Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 41.

Correspondingly, modern and contemporary art could enter official communications, coming within reach of the general urban, educated population rather than only a few initiated participants in an underground movement. As with the Fine Arts Academies themselves, the Chinese Artists' Association had been suspended during the Cultural Revolution, and was not reinstated until after 1978. The Artists' Association maintained its status as the primary national organization for official professional artists, and it retained control over the National Gallery of Art, but its regional branches began to take on a new significance during the 1980s. Thus, even with this ostensibly national group, the art scene in China became a series of regional niches, overseen by provincial-level administrators.<sup>111</sup> The 1978 statutes of the Artists' Association reveal the generalized liberalism of the time that left much to be interpreted at the provincial and local levels:

We organize for the members to carry out artistic experiments, strengthen theoretical research, make the artistic creation flourish, develop an art that shows national characteristics and distinctive features of the zeitgeist, (an art) that shows a large variety of subjects, forms and styles; we strengthen the international exchange and we fight for the establishment of a strong socialist and modern (Four Modernizations) nation in our country.<sup>112</sup>

The “experiments” that artists were asked to carry out were in theory in support of the practical Four Modernizations (science and technology, agriculture, defense, and industry), but the caveat that “artistic creation [should] flourish” implies considerable latitude and a departure from socialist realist artistic orthodoxy. As such, the official art world actually encouraged and made room for unofficial experimentations, resulting in an artistic milieu defined more by experimental trends than an official-unofficial dichotomy.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Statutes of the Chinese Artists' Association, 9/11/1978, quoted in Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 45.



## **The Pond Society and experimentation in local niches**

The atomized Chinese art world that existed under the aegis of the centralized institutional structure is an important context for the experimentation in new media art that took place during the 1980s. As in other realms of intellectual and academic exploration at this time, artists tended to coalesce around quasi-entrepreneurial ventures. The activity around Hangzhou in the mid-1980s, comprised mainly of graduates of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, is an interesting example of the blossoming of an avant-garde in the semi-official art world. Responding to the mainstream Sixth National Fine Art Exhibition, held in 1984, recent graduate Zhang Peili and other artists asserted that the avant-garde experimental art needed a presence in the exhibition circuit and formed an unofficial collective to help direct official attention and funds in that direction. The collective was almost immediately contacted by the Zhejiang Chapter of the Chinese Artists' Association and offered an unofficial exhibition.<sup>113</sup> Taking the name the Society of Young Artists, Zhang and his colleagues, including Song Ling, Zha Li, and Geng Jianyi, prepared for a year for an exhibition they titled *'85 New Space* (*'85 Xin Kongjian*, 新空间). The Artists' Association even rented two houses and provided art supplies for the collective to support the creation of new work as well as the orchestration of the exhibition. The young artists, including Zhang Peili, were mostly oil painters, and somewhat ideologically inclined toward the existential philosophy of Sartre with an interest in Heidegger as well as Wittgenstein's explorations of logic and language. Despite these affiliations, there was no group manifesto or overarching style until disagreements among the artists resulted in the codification of the exhibition's general direction, "...to

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<sup>113</sup> Shi Jiu, trans. Kela Shang, "On New Space and the Pond Society (1987), first published in *The Trend of Art Thought* [*Meishu Shichao*], 1987, no. 1:16-21., reprinted in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, eds. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 86.

convey the ‘sense of modern’ [*sic*] through strengthening formal languages and restricting [explicit] expression.”<sup>114</sup> ’85 *New Space* and the support that it generated from the official art world was thus a somewhat controlled experiment for the artists and the Artists’ Association as well as a platform for communication between the younger generation and official artist-cadres. The results were an exhibition that received mixed reviews but substantial media attention in the mainstream publications *Art* and *Fine Art in China*.

This coalition provided the short-term conditions that young artists needed to propel themselves from the world of the art student to the world of the professional artist while skirting fully-official status or personal membership in the Artists’ Association. They were avoiding the career path of the official Chinese artist by not joining the C.A.A., marking this as an experiment and a transition. The temporary coalition also provided the experience of maintaining a loosely structured organization, which in turn gave rise to the artistic collective The Pond Society (*Chi she*, 池社), formed in 1986 after the Society of Young Artists had disbanded following the close of the ’85 *New Space* exhibition. In the formation of The Pond Society, we see the coalescing of a group ideal and philosophical orientation. The concept of the pond was linked to the group’s interest in immersion in artistic exploration and the amorphous and unknowable, indefinable nature of art. The group’s manifesto further asserted the abandonment of an attempt to master artistic techniques, specifically easel painting, instead moving to ill-defined “artistic activity” that explored many media as a way of communicating through visual language.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

The Pond Society and the direction that it took with respect to new media experimentation is of key importance to the next chapter and its discussion of Zhang Peili's early video art. This group and its progression from the academy to an affiliation with the official Artists' Association, to staking its own claim on a new, experimental set of "artistic activities," is also an important case study in our examination of the liminal space occupied by semi-official academic and artistic organizations throughout twentieth century China. The seeming protection that became available to the avant-garde, and the space for controversial art within the sphere of official policy and academic activity is an exceptional and powerful development that places artistic experimentation within the purview of specifically Chinese modern academic scholarship.

### **Eremitic Participation in the Semi-Official Art World**

This chapter has provided a broad overview of the academic world of twentieth century China, with specific attention to the role of the semi-official institutions that populated the intellectual landscape in the Republican and Reform Eras. The founding of the nation's art academies as part of the Republican Era's wide-reaching New Culture Movement, based on educational theories of Kantian pedagogues like Cai Yuanpei and the European academic models that individual artists encountered during their studies abroad, is an important point of departure for understanding the role of art and aesthetic education in China's self-conscious intellectual modernization. The continuing and exacting standards of the academic tradition speak to art students' place in the nation's elite academic community. As such, the world of the Republican Era needs to be taken into account as part of the creation story of the modern Chinese experimental artist.

The New Culture Movement's push for a new nationalism was originally tinged with a pro-Western, pro-science approach to developing a robust, modern, Chinese academic community. By the 1930s, the original idealistic momentum of this movement, set in motion by leaders who were originally born into the Qing scholar-gentry class, had fizzled among the students who had been educated during the later years of Republican political turmoil. These students were in general personally disillusioned with the goals of the New Culture Movement, and identified more with the traditional Confucian model of a melancholic, alienated scholar who withdraws from public life and writes in coded language about the corruption of politics in order to admonish the government and ruling elite. The college and university environments at this time sheltered students and professors who rediscovered and celebrated figures from diverse moments of a dynastic Chinese history who had been previously dismissed as anti-modern and anti-scientific by the scientific iconoclasts of the New Culture Movement.

Among these students drawn to scholarly admonition in the 1930s were scholars who later became Party leaders, including the philosopher and historian Hu Sheng. Hu was a senior official in Deng Xiaoping's administration who served as the president of CASS in the 1980s and as such set the tone for much academic research and community-building during the Reform Era. Despite his loyalty to the Party, he promoted inconsistent policy that changed in a matter of months from a call to open China's research purview to include liberal, bourgeois topics to a proscription of research that did not include a practical application of Marxist doctrine. This alignment with prevailing political trends, implied Hu's personal skepticism at the Party's interference in the world of academia despite his proclivity for a rapprochement with China's non-Marxist history.

This intellectual environment, colored by leaders like Hu who had come of age in a time when scholarly debates were often conducted in coded language meant only for the initiated academics and not their politically-oriented administrators, gave rise to a multiplicity of semi-official academic organizations in the 1980s. These institutions, publications, and collectives began to define a nonofficial, quasi-public intellectual sphere that piggy-backed on the curricular experimentation and academic vitality of the mid-1980s and the Party's desire to align itself with the nation's intellectual leadership. The art academies similarly became hubs through which nonofficial groups and organizations could convene.

As examined in this chapter, a clear example of the negotiation of a heretofore uncharted liminal space occurred in Hangzhou in 1985 with the unofficial Society of Young Artists, the group of recent art school graduates who obtained sponsorship from the provincial branch of the official Chinese Artists' Association to develop their exhibition *'85 Art Space*. This group of experimental artists who had gained official attention by speaking out against the mainstream art being exhibited in official venues eventually segued into The Pond Society, an avant-garde collective of critical importance to the experimental new media art work that is at the heart of this dissertation.

The following chapter will explore how The Pond Society fostered the early video art of Zhang Peili and became part of the negotiation of nonofficial space for dissident and admonitory art in the 1980s. Despite the surface-level philosophical affiliations with diverse modern and contemporary Western schools of philosophic and literary thought, the persistent trope of the melancholic, withdrawn eremite is a powerful continuation of the Confucian modes of protest explored in conjunction with the negotiation of modernity in China throughout the twentieth century. As described by Xu Bing in the

quote that opened this chapter, the seminars, discussions, and reading material that flooded the intellectual sphere in the 1980s was overwhelming and even “boring” since the abundant and conflicting viewpoints were an unedited mass of history and theory from all the previously “closed” decades. Xu Bing’s reaction to the feverish consumption of intellectual flotsam and jetsam will prove to be an important consideration with respect to the value and resonance of the eremitic model of the Confucian scholar-artist in the realm of experimental new media art.

## Chapter 3

### Academic Media in Modern China, the Art Academy in the People's Republic, and Wu Shanzhuan's Installation Art

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*There is... something that a painter can learn. Let him read ten thousand volumes and walk ten thousand miles. All these will wash away the turgid matters of the mundane world and help form the hills and valleys within his bosom. Once he has made these preparations within himself, whatever he sketches and paints will be able to convey the spirit of the mountains and rivers.*<sup>116</sup>

-Dong Qichang, 1630

*Technique is the basis of a professional, but what is more important is an artist with a spiritual and generous heart, with sincere sentiment, who is continually searching and thereby creating real beauty.*<sup>117</sup>

- Lin Fengmian, 1930s

*It is right for... artists to study... artistic creation, but the science of Marxism-Leninism must be studied by all revolutionaries... Artists should study... the various classes in society, their mutual relations and respective conditions, their physiognomy and psychology.*<sup>118</sup>

-Mao Zedong, 1942

*Literature and art are the concerns of artists and writers themselves. If the party gives too specific a leadership to literature and art, then literature and art will stagnate.*<sup>119</sup>

-Zhao Dan, 1980

*I believe art is a silent ocean ... It is a static, formless, empty box – it must accept absolutely anything from absolutely anyone, and it is destined never to be full. Its strength is in nothingness...*<sup>120</sup>

- Wu Shanzhuan, 1986

These statements on the nature of art and the mindset of the artist reflect the wide conceptual deviations about art and education in twentieth century China, occasionally as mined from much earlier periods. Lin Fengmian's quote from the early twentieth

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<sup>116</sup> Dong Qichang, *Huazhi*, in Dong Qichang, *Rongtai* (1630), quoted in Li Chu-Tsing, "The Artistic Theories of the Literati," in *The Chinese Scholar's Studio: Artistic Life in the Late Ming Period: an Exhibition from the Shanghai Museum*, eds. Li Chu-Tsing, and James C. Y. Watt (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 17.

<sup>117</sup> Lin Fengmian, quoted in Christopher Crouch, *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture: Tradition, Modernity, and Globalization* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2010), 176.

<sup>118</sup> Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art (May 1942)," in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 463.

<sup>119</sup> Zhao Dan in *The People's Daily* (Renmin Ribao), 8 October 1980, quoted in *Dictionary of the Political Thought of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Henry Yuhuai He (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 627.

<sup>120</sup> Wu Shanzhuan, "Silent Ocean, Blind Ocean, Genderless Ocean (1986, unpublished)" in *Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humour International* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2005), Insert, Artists' Writings 02.

century speaks to the modernist ideals and personalized missions that he felt were necessary for artists to internalize as part of their education. Mao's quote from his address on the arts at the Communist Party's revolutionary headquarters in Yan'an in 1942 reflects an entirely different directive. The idea that artists must study Marxist political theory and the classes that they should serve became the overarching goal of art education during the People's Republic era, accompanied by strict prescriptions for style and subject matter. Yet by the Reform Era beginning in the late 1970s, Zhao Dan (1915-1980), a famous film actor and Party member, was one of many voices advocating for increased artistic independence. Wu Shanzhuan's quote about art as an autonomous "silent ocean" reflects his own formation as an artist during the same period and the profound influence that he felt not from the Ministry of Culture or his art teachers but from the influx of texts on Western philosophy in the 1980s. In his case, he was extremely influenced by the work of Karl Popper and his division of the world into ontological sub-worlds including "the world of the products of the human mind" called World 3. Wu's independent and extra-curricular reading that contributed to his artistic development cannot be understood without also acknowledging an extremely well known prescription by the late Ming literatus Dong Qichang (1555-1636) that extensive reading and travel were a crucial part of an artists' moral and intellectual development. This chapter builds on the overarching thesis of this dissertation that the Confucian conception of the artist as a moral intellectual who has "...read ten thousand books and walk[ed] ten thousand miles,"<sup>121</sup> had much bearing on the development of experimental art practice during China's Reform Era. A colossal figure in the history of Chinese art as a painter, calligrapher, connoisseur, and theorist, Dong's influence was unavoidable during the

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<sup>121</sup> Dong Qichang, *Huazhi*, 17.



Reform Era when classical Chinese texts were slowly re-emerging in academic spheres. Indeed, Dong's theories of artistic growth through study and exposure were actively revived during this period and became important factors in the academic environment developed at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (ZAFA) during Wu's tenure there.

This chapter will explore academic art mediums throughout the twentieth century as a means for engaging the early installation works of Wu Shanzhuan and the context of his artistic coming of age at ZAFA in Hangzhou in the 1980s. The specific conditions surrounding Wu's experimentation with the medium of installation are important to our investigation of the admonitory nature of these early works and the admonitory gesture of pursuing a non-academic medium in the Reform Era. Of the three artists that form the heart of this study, Wu most directly engages the chaotic visual environment of China in the late twentieth century, through the medium of installation art new to the Chinese art scene at this time. Before discussing the individual case of Wu Shanzhuan, it is extremely helpful to investigate the environment at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts specifically during his tenure there in the 1980s, with respect to its important position in the history of twentieth century China. It is my contention that the intellectual environment at ZAFA and its self-conscious identity as a progressive and liberal institution was an important part of the art education undertaken by Wu Shanzhuan and his colleagues in the 1980s, influencing their predecessors as well. The previous chapter explored the connection between the generation coming of age in the 1930s and the generation of the '85 New Wave, with specific attention to the preservation of Confucian ethics and morality in amidst a climate of modernization and Westernization. This chapter will explore the key contributions of Lin Fengmian and his work in art education in the 1930s and Zheng Shengtian's role at the art academy in the 1980s. It will also bridge the gap

between these two eras by examining the relative importance of Confucian remonstrance in the People's Republic Era, from its foundation in the 1940s through the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The educational praxis at ZAFPA and the ideological connotations of specific art media play a key role in understanding the import of Wu Shanzhuan's adoption of installation art in the 1980s.

### **Fairyland, Woodcuts, and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s**

ZAFPA and the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) are exceptional in the history of art and ideas not just because they are considered the most elite arts education institutions in China, but because they are the two art academies that have been supervised directly by the State Ministry of Culture, and as such have an even more direct relationship to national cultural policies than other educational institutions in China.<sup>122</sup> As described in the previous chapter, ZAFPA and CAFA were founded by the artists Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong, respectively, both in collaboration with the educator Cai Yuanpei, all of whom had studied in Europe. These pedagogues were oriented toward the particular versions of Western modern visual idioms that appealed to them personally, but the programs at the academies were fairly uniform in their modern academic approach to art education. This rejected the Confucian model of passing a master's style to his students in favor of distributed and progressive pedagogy. Despite the wide Western art historical gap between Xu's attachment to a variation of nineteenth century academic realism and Lin's proclivity for Impressionism, these two oil painters were both part of liberal, progressive, and Western-oriented educational methodologies.

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<sup>122</sup> Zheng Shengtian, "Brushes are Weapons," in *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76*, eds. Richard King, Ralph C. Croizier, Scott Watson, and Zheng Shengtian (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 95.

At ZAFPA, the progressive theoretical underpinnings of the curriculum were tied to political action from the early days of the institution. The formation of revolutionary student groups like the Art Society of the Eighteenth at West Lake in 1929, the eighteenth year of the Republic of China, was a direct reaction to Lu Xun's 1927 call for the adoption of woodblock prints as the medium of the Communist movement.<sup>123</sup> This politically radical element advocated woodblock prints as an art form with the potential for mass production and a suitable medium to depict the suffering and exploitation of workers and peasants under capitalism. The majority of the students and faculty at ZAFPA, including Lin Fengmian, were neither radical nor allied with the Communist cause but the establishment of this type of revolutionary student group with the encouragement of Lin was indicative of the overall spirit of experimentation at the academy from its very inception. The political goals of the group, however, quickly became dangerous for the academy, and several society members were expelled later that year for "political reasons," with other active communists expelled in 1932.<sup>124</sup>

The expulsion of art students affiliated with Communist politics in the 1930s is an important precedent for the academy's plasticity and ability to absorb or reject ostensibly non-academic impulses. Unsurprisingly, the Art Society of the Eighteenth, dropping the reference to Hangzhou's West Lake, continued its operations outside of the academy after the expulsion of some of its members. The Society moved most of its activities to Shanghai, and linked up with Lu Xun and likeminded art students from the Shanghai College of Art, although independent from any art school. Lu Xun had already devoted

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<sup>123</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 82.

<sup>124</sup> "Lu Xun xiansheng yu 'Yiba yishe'," [Lu Xun and the Art Society of the Eighteenth], in *Meishu*, 1979, vols. 1 and 2, reprinted in *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* by Julia F. Andrews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 14.

many years to studying theories of art and aesthetics in order to be able to articulate the needs of a new national art movement, and had become part of Shanghai's cosmopolitan nouveau-literati scene upon his move there in 1927.<sup>125</sup> Lu became close friends with Uchiyama Kanzo, a Japanese-born bookshop owner who frequently hosted Lu and the Art Society of the Eighteenth in the rooms above his store as well as sponsoring art exhibitions.<sup>126</sup> By the early 1930s, Lu had translated several books on modern and Western art into Chinese, including Itagaki Takao's Japanese text, *History of Modern Art*, which narrated a history of Western art from the French Revolution to the early twentieth century that relied heavily on Alois Riegl's theories. Lu was especially interested in Riegl's articulation of *kunstwollen*, the specific will-to-art of a given time and place that explained stylistic and mediatic developments in terms of the historical conditions in which they developed.<sup>127</sup> His own personal inclination toward woodblock prints was an interest that began when he studied in Japan in the early 1900s and matured in the late 1920s and early 1930s while in Shanghai with Uchiyama.

The long history of printed images in Chinese culture was another factor contributing to Lu's enthusiasm for the woodblock print. In light of the technical ability to produce and circulate prints in China from as early as the seventh century, when Tang dynasty Buddhist images and texts were printed in large quantities, the medium itself was not novel in the early twentieth century. It was the attention paid to printmaking as a fine arts medium, both in the academies and in Lu's and Uchiyama's Shanghai salon, that makes this particular moment in Chinese print culture important to our discussion of

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<sup>125</sup> Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 81.

<sup>126</sup> Christopher T. Keaveney, *Beyond Brushtalk: Sino-Japanese Literary Exchange in the Interwar Period* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 39.

<sup>127</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 82.

experimentation in new media in twentieth century China. The techniques of woodblock printmaking as taught by Uchiyama Kaikichi were different from the dominant artisanal printmaking methods in China. Uchiyama's modernist commitment was based on the idea that one artist would compose and execute each print from start to finish, whereas in Chinese and Japanese tradition a team of workers would participate, each having distinct and limited role in commercial print production. Lu was convinced that the *kunstwoollen* of modern China pointed to the woodblock print as the art of the moment. As with the vernacular literature that he promoted as a writer, he felt that woodcuts were a medium with mass appeal, both because they were relatively cheap to make and distribute and because of the expressionistic potential of black and white compositions. He was particularly drawn to the woodblock prints of his contemporaries in Germany, especially the work of Käthe Kollwitz, an artist with whom Lu corresponded personally.<sup>128</sup>

...the works of Käthe Kollwitz show that there are others "injured and insulted" like us in many places of the earth as well as artists who mourn, protest and struggle on their behalf ... [and portray] a different kind of people, not "heroes" perhaps, but more approachable and sympathetic...<sup>129</sup>

Kollwitz' compelling subject matter depicting social injustice inflicted upon peasants and workers in dramatic situations, composed in a limited palette of black, white, and gray, was for Lu an ideal confluence of form and content. This segued well with his interest in Soviet Marxist art theory and his translation of the theories of Georgy Plekhanov and Anatoly Lunacharsky, both of whom argued for the development of art and aesthetics that was fused with the "realism" of class consciousness and proletarian sympathies.<sup>130</sup>

Lu's personal investment in the creation of the leftist avant-garde woodcut movement in the 1930s extended beyond the introduction of foreign theorists and artists

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<sup>128</sup> Barbara McCloskey, *Artists of World War II* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>129</sup> Lu Xun, Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 82.

into the Chinese art scene to the promotion of the medium through education. He organized study classes through his group the Left-Wing League of Writers, including the Summer Literature and Art Study class, a politically oriented investigation of art history attended by many members of the Art Society of the Eighteenth in 1930.<sup>131</sup> Lu's educational program also sometimes ventured into the realm of studio instruction, most notably in August of 1931 when Lu and Uchiyama collaborated to bring the bookseller's younger brother Uchiyama Kaikichi from the Seijo Institute in Tokyo to teach Japanese woodblock printmaking techniques. This short course consisted of the printmaker lecturing and demonstrating in Japanese with Lu Xun serving as translator. The very basic techniques were conveyed in one day, and the remainder of the week-long workshop was devoted to practice, along with lectures by Lu Xun that presented inspiring print works like Kollwitz' *Peasant War* series of etchings and aquatints from 1902-1908.<sup>132</sup>

That Lu Xun was fostering an alternative educational venue to the art academy at this time is interesting for our study of admonition and art media for several reasons. First, there was certainly an admonitory overtone to the work that Lu promoted, but it was a straightforward, international, Marxist brand of remonstrance that is not similar to the Confucian-infused admonition explored by the artists at the heart of this study. Lu's written descriptions of social injustices were made emphasized by the formal elements in the woodcut prints he promoted: the stark contrast of black and white hues were designed to have wide appeal, and wide circulation. One example of these works is *Scuffle* (1933) by Zheng Yefu (1909-1974), the author of an instructional book on how to make

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<sup>131</sup> Lü Peng. *A history of art in 20th-Century China* (Milano: Charta, 2010), 340.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 341 and Keaveney, *Beyond Brushstalk*, 39.

woodblock prints and proprietor of the China Woodcut Supplies Collective Factory.<sup>133</sup>

This image of a street demonstration and the clash between the protesters and police uses thick lines and harsh diagonals to convey a sense of unease and struggle, and undifferentiated facial rendering to enforce the class-based rather than individualistic struggle at hand.

The robust woodcut movement that grew out of Lu Xun and Uchiyama's salon environment in 1920s Shanghai created work that served as a fiery call-to-arms and angry outcry at proletarian suffering in China and around the world. Its anti-traditional orientation stood in opposition to the type of Confucian-inspired scholarship that was contemporaneously being explored in universities and academies during the 1930s, highlighted in the previous chapter. Secondly, it is important to understand the political positioning of this informal study group with respect to the relatively neutral environment at the academy. The history of Modern art in Europe is predicated on avant-garde artists' rejection of or from mainstream academic institutions and exhibitions, but this separation was one of degree rather than fundamental principles. The Left-Wing League of Artists, as the group associated with Lu Xun came to call themselves, was formed after the expulsion of radical students from the National Hangzhou Art School (ZAFAs original name), but the group did not sever its ties with academia. The academy and its leaders remained aware of the group's activities and print exhibitions in Shanghai, and the group repeatedly invited Lin Fengmian to support, endorse, or join their

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<sup>133</sup> Christer von der Burg, An Bin, and Hwang Yin, *The Art of Contemporary Chinese Woodcuts (Zhongguo Dang Dai Mu Ban Yi Shu)* (London: Muban Foundation, 2003), 45.

movement.<sup>134</sup> Thus, the Art Society of the Eighteenth and the Left-Wing League of Artists were not anti-academy so much as they were anti-capitalism.

In Hangzhou, Lin Fengmian along with Cai Yuanpei had founded their academy with the goal to, “introduce Western art, reorganize Chinese art, synthesize Chinese and Western art, and create an art for the present epoch.”<sup>135</sup> In theory, this is quite similar to Lu Xun’s goal for the Left-Wing League of Artists, minus his Communist agenda. Lu’s preface to a 1931 exhibition of woodblock prints by the Art Society of the Eighteenth, stated his understanding of Chinese art as divided into two distinct categories, the art of the oppressed (woodblock prints) and the art of the oppressors (ink painting), an implicit criticism of the mainstream art academies and their elite faculty and students.<sup>136</sup> That Lu’s group was made up entirely of such elites, some of whom were still studying at the criticized academies escaped mention. The fact that the academy was able to accommodate students of varied political and intellectual affiliations is what recommends it as an important part of this history of avant-garde art movements in China.

Lin Fengmian himself was oriented towards Western Modern art; specifically oil painting styles from France such as Fauvism and Impressionism. While the academy’s curriculum certainly reflected this affinity, it was promoted within a context of freedom and choice. Lin’s guiding belief was that the academy should foster “freedom of thought, harmony, and coexistence,”<sup>137</sup> an application of Confucian principles on maintaining a peaceful society. The manifestation of this belief was Lin’s unique pedagogy that allowed for openness and experimentation rather than rigid specialization. There were two

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<sup>134</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 82.

<sup>135</sup> Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 28.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 44

<sup>137</sup> Crouch, *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture*, 170.



dominant departments, Chinese painting (*guohua*, 国画) and Western oil painting (*xihua*, 西画), but students were encouraged to experiment with both, even comparing the two traditions in the same studio. The Western painting department offered foundational instruction in the Beaux-Arts academic tradition but students were also encouraged to experiment in modern styles. Perhaps most significantly, students were given a great deal of autonomy in choosing their courses and professors throughout their academic careers, unlike the more traditional academic practice of choosing one medium in which to specialize after a few initial years of foundational education, or the traditional Confucian model of constraining one's practice to the style of one's teacher.<sup>138</sup> Like Cai Yuanpei, Lin believed that the academy would function best when all students felt they had independence and freedom and were committed to ethical behavior when interacting with their immediate community and the nation as a whole. The environment of experimentation and tolerant coexistence in the art studios contributed to Lin's vision of developing a new generation of artists whose practice would contribute to addressing wider social issues of the new nation, but that contribution could not be direct or instrumental. Lin felt that the academy had to be slightly insulated from the most heated political activity of the day, hence the expulsion of some of the most zealous members of the Art Society of the Eighteenth. Lin and Cai felt that the preconditions for shaping true citizen artists would be to allow them to synthesize their own personal style and mission, and most importantly Lin felt that to become an artist, one had to have "a free heart."<sup>139</sup> Lin did believe that Chinese artists needed to become aware of the art movements going on in Europe, but he used a slightly less heavy hand than Lu Xun. His compilation *Arts*

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

from *Around the World in 1935*, for example, was more or less devoted to art in France, Belgium, and Germany, but it covered a variety of developments in modern art and reported on a comprehensive listing of exhibitions, giving a sense of the breadth of European artistic activity.<sup>140</sup> Rather than being an arbiter of taste, Lin functioned as a moderator of aesthetic and ideological debates, as remembered by the *guohua* ink painter Deng Bai:

At that time, abstractionists were arguing with realists, but Mr. Lin seemed to transcend all of it, he did not support one or the other, deprecating neither; but both sides of the debating students all felt that Principal Lin had taken care of them, and belonged to them. Each student group was clarifying their point of view by exhibitions and publications. *The students were always fantastically busy thinking and making; the school was an art fairyland with its freedom.*<sup>141</sup>

It is ostensibly this “fairlyand” environment that Lu and his followers took issue with, as it offended their Marxist sensibilities to live in a fantasy world insulated from the social injustices of the day. The disdain at the elite freedom to pick and choose from any number of academic mediums, rather than channeling the *kunstvollen* of modern China, led Lu to encourage an exclusive practice of woodcut printmaking.

This protected exploration of artistic mediums at the academy, in parallel with the leftist woodcut print movement outside of the academy, established the variations in the concept of modern and avant-garde Chinese art among the cultural elite in the 1920s and 1930s. It should be noted that printmaking was offered as a course of study at the academy from its inception, although the majority of students focused on painting. But even within the academy, printmaking expanded throughout the 1930s as student interest grew in response to Lu Xun and the Left-Wing League of Artists. The woodcut movement, starting outside the academy, was thus incorporated into academic

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<sup>140</sup> Frank Dikötter, *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 60.

<sup>141</sup> Deng Bai, quoted in Crouch, *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture*, 174. My italics.

discussions and experimentation, and many of the movement's key figures were graduates and faculty of the academies in Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. This plasticity of the academy's curriculum reflects the conceptual foundations Lin Fengmian and Cai Yuanpei ascribed to art and aesthetic education, clearly articulated in the epigram by Lin: "Technique is the basis of a professional, but what is more important is an artist with a spiritual and generous heart, with sincere sentiment, who is continually searching and thereby creating real beauty."<sup>142</sup>

By incorporating Lu and Uchiyama's modernist notions of the print as the product of an individual rather than a workshop and a fine art rather than a commercial craft, the academies played an important role in the pluralization of Chinese modern art mediums. While Lu promoted the collectivity of the woodblock "movement," the production modality was that of the single artist rather than a collective. Academies contributed to pluralization in Chinese art by absorbing the medium of the print as another means to convey an artist's "sincere sentiment" as articulated by Lin. The modernization of China's education system and Cai's 1917 call to replace religion with aesthetic education, is in effect all part of a project that would pluralize the discussion of ethics, morality, and aesthetics by broadening the conversation to include more art forms and more practitioners than traditional Confucian literati culture had allowed. It is a reassessment of this mentality of pluralization that took place in the 1980s that made the experimentation of Wu Shanzhuan possible, and the activity of the intervening decades that makes it remarkable.

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<sup>142</sup> Lin Fengmian, quoted in Crouch, *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture*, 176.

## **Mao's Talks at Yan'an and Art Academies in the People's Republic**

It is the ultimate triumph of the Communist Party and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that gave Lu Xun and the woodcut movement iconic status and importance in the nation's art education system. Whereas printmaking had been an option as a course of study in the 1930s, this discipline was heavily promoted and the departments formalized in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the academies became much more rigid in their instruction in both form and content. The directives for these educational institutions in the People's Republic were mostly honed during the years of the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) in the inland city of Yan'an, Shaanxi Province, which served as the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party during the war years. The Communist Party founded its own ideologically driven art school, the Lu Xun Art Academy, in Yan'an in 1938 in order to train artists to execute propaganda art as part of the war effort.<sup>143</sup> In addition to specialized courses in art topics like the laws of composition and color science, all students underwent compulsory instruction in Marxism-Leninism, in the history of the Chinese Communist Party, and in the materialist conception of history.<sup>144</sup> While the activity at the Lu Xun Art Academy resulted in the practical and ideological training of artists, there was still an amount of exploration reminiscent of the broad sources enlisted by Lin Fengmian as teaching tools in Hangzhou. Lu Xun's translation of Itagaki's history of modern art in the West was still widely read and discussed, and illustrations and prints of Auguste Rodin and Paul Cézanne were exhibited on separate occasions, reflecting the enduring fascination with

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<sup>143</sup> The Lu Xun Art Academy relocated to Shenyang, Liaoning Province in 1946 and renamed the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art, its current designation, in 1958.

<sup>144</sup> Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 363.

modern artistic variants on realism, impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, and romanticism.<sup>145</sup>

This persistent fascination with modernism writ large was halted in 1942 after the public declaration of the Party's cultural policy by Mao at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature. This was a watershed moment, part of the larger Rectification Campaign of 1942-1944, that divorced the Party from the generalized modernist inquiries of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, and redirected future efforts towards a specifically Communist vision of modern China. Mao's dictates were aimed at establishing a clear hierarchy that placed art in a subordinate role to other aspects of the revolution: "We do not support excessive emphasis on the importance of literature and art, nor do we support their underestimation. Literature and art are subordinate to politics, and yet in turn exert enormous influence on it."<sup>146</sup> Mao was vague with regards to the specific mediums and genres of revolutionary art, but articulate about the source material that he felt would generate a new Chinese artistic tradition:

Rich deposits of literature and art actually exist in popular life itself: they are things in their natural forms, crude but also extremely lively, rich, and fundamental; they make all processed forms of literature pale in comparison, they are the sole and inexhaustible source of processed forms of literature and art.<sup>147</sup>

The popular life he referred to was a specifically domestic one, an important part of his overall plan to steer the nation's focus away from cosmopolitan concerns and toward a self-contained Chinese sphere, albeit by appropriated the Socialist Realist idiom from the Soviet Union. Lastly, it is important to note that Mao's policy was completely dependent upon the concept of mass control and ownership:

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art"*, 75.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

Whatever genuinely belongs to the masses must be under the leadership of the popular masses. New literature and art, which are part of new culture, are naturally in the same category. We do not by any means refuse to use the old forms of the feudal class and the bourgeoisie, but in our hands these old forms are reconstructed and filled with new content, so that they become revolutionary and serve the people.<sup>148</sup>

Essentially, Mao was establishing an artistic modality in which there was no room for art for art's sake. Every work, whether executed in a "lively" vernacular medium or an "old form of the feudal class" would need to be ideologically sound and aimed at an audience of "the people," specifically, peasants, proletarian workers, and soldiers.

Despite this apparent tolerance for artwork in a variety of styles so long as it was designed for the masses, Mao definitively endorsed one style as the visual embodiment of party values when he simply stated, "We are advocates of socialist realism."<sup>149</sup> This style was defined in the regulations of the Soviet Writer's Union in 1934, a document that served as an important conceptual sourcebook for Chinese artists in the 1940s and 1950s:

...the basic tool of Soviet literature and Soviet literary criticism... [whereby] artist[s] describe truthfully, historically, and concretely from the perspective of the revolutionary development of reality. At the same time, the authenticity and specific historical situations described by art must be combined with the task of ideologically transforming and educating the working people using the socialist spirit.<sup>150</sup>

Academic curricula were revamped after the establishment of the People's Republic, essentially implementing a "Sovietization" that advocated the refined academic rendering of socialist subject matter in a style drawn from both contemporaneous Soviet Socialist Realist painters and from a nineteenth century source: the Russian painters known as The Wanderers. This group of painters, including Ilya Repin (1844-1930) and

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* 65

<sup>149</sup> Mao Zedong, from the Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature (1942), quoted in Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), 44.

<sup>150</sup> Beijing Normal University Literature and Art Theory Group, ed., *Reference Materials for Literature Theory Study* (*Wenxue lilun xuexi cankao ziliao*), (classified materials), (Beijing: Higher Education Publishing House, 1956 edition), 648, cited in Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 497.

Ivan Kramskoi (1837-1887), had attended the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Art (although Kramskoi and several other members of the group had been expelled due to their disagreements with academic policies), and were inspired by the radical writer Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Chernyshevsky's work *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* (1855) was especially important in both nineteenth century Russia and mid-twentieth century China for its straightforward appeal that art should draw attention to real suffering in the world.<sup>151</sup>

In addition to Russian painters becoming the acknowledged “classical” models that Chinese painters studied, the teaching techniques of the St. Petersburg academician Pavel Chistyakov (1832-1919), presented directly from Soviet textbooks, became dominant in Chinese art classrooms. These methods stressed learning to see objects as a combination of forms, with stress on the junctions between different shapes in the composition of any object or figure. This method was criticized as overly mechanical by the realist Xu Beihong, who remained the titular director at CAFA until his death in 1954, but Party Officials were installed after 1949 to assure compliance with the Yan'an protocols.<sup>152</sup> Lin Fengmian remained on the faculty at the academy in Hangzhou until 1951, but his affinity for modernist painting and his methods of encouraging individual choice and experimentation brought him under fire, and he left the school after enduring public criticism as a “formalist.”<sup>153</sup>

In addition to the sharp turn toward Socialist Realism in painting and the continued promotion of woodblock printmaking as a revolutionary medium, the PRC academies introduced a few other genres as part of their courses of study, most notably

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<sup>151</sup> Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 497.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 496.

<sup>153</sup> Crouch, *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture*, 175.

the folk art tradition of *nianhua* (年画), new year's prints. Lin's replacement at the academy in Hangzhou was Jiang Feng, a Communist artist who had joined the Party in Yan'an. Jiang implemented many ideological changes at the academy, from compulsory Marxist studies, to requiring students to do fieldwork with peasants and factory workers, to requiring all faculty to live on campus. Jiang, who had joined the faculty of the academy as part of the Military Control Commission in 1949 prior to assuming the role of president, was also eager to implement the directive from the Ministry of Culture that same year to reinvigorate the traditional folk art of *nianhua* to "serve as...propaganda for the ideology of people's democracy... [and] emphasize and express the new and joyful lives and struggles of the working people."<sup>154</sup> Jiang organized three *nianhua*-based "mass art activities" on the Hangzhou campus from 1949 to 1950. These activities required the participation of students from all disciplines, and the second and third iterations of the project involved students working on farms and in factories to collect source material for their compositions prior to beginning the design process.<sup>155</sup>

It is crucial for our understanding of the uptake of non-academic media to study the policy and curricular shifts at the nation's art academies, specifically the academy in Hangzhou, in the People's Republic Era. Lin's goal of cultivating artists who had found their own personal means of expression, supported by appropriate technical and philosophical education, was supplanted by the Yan'an-infused Party directives that strove for artistic coherence. The Soviet instructional methods were just one means by which the Party implemented a total Marxist educational idiom. It is the transformation

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<sup>154</sup> Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 453.

<sup>155</sup> Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 45.



of these educational idioms into an ideological environment during the Cultural Revolution that had the most impact during the 1980s Reform Era.

### **The Academy in the Visual Chaos of the Cultural Revolution**

The policies and practices of the Cultural Revolution have been well documented, as have the socialist realist works created by groups of artist-workers from 1966-1976. It was a culturally and politically unique period and has become a continuing source of material for artists, writers, and filmmakers. The specific importance of the Cultural Revolution's impact on the art academy system and art world in general was its achievement of a shift away from personal agency or choice with regards to artistic medium or subject toward a socially and politically consensual medium and subject matter. Even prior to the onset of the Cultural Revolution, the art academies had transformed considerably during the People's Republic Era, as evidenced by Jiang Feng's mass art activities at ZAFAs in the early 1950s, accompanied by an ideological purge of many of ZAFAs's leaders in the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957. This purge included the removal of ZAFAs vice-president Mo Pu, a painter and Party member who was later to be reinstated as ZAFAs president from 1980-1983, a point which we will revisit in our discussion of the Reform Era. Also, before the dramatic purges of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, Jiang had promoted a mediatic shift towards the "international" medium of oil painting and away from ink painting (*guohua*, literally "Chinese" or "domestic" painting) because of its association with Confucian literati culture. At a 1950 conference on reforming the medium of ink painting to better serve Yan'an directives, Jiang declared that, "Chinese painting cannot reflect reality and will never produce large works, and so it must be eliminated. In the future, international painting will certainly emerge. Oil

painting is able to reflect reality and produce large masterpieces, and it is international.”<sup>156</sup> Despite the continued interest in woodblock prints as a revolutionary mass art medium, it was clear from the early days of the People’s Republic that Mao’s China would be visually represented in highly stylized academic socialist realist oil painting. The most successful of these works, from an aesthetic and ideological standpoint, were reproduced widely in publications, as posters, in calendars, and occasionally on billboards in public spaces, but they originated as large oil paintings.

While the Anti-Rightist Campaign had many repercussions, the particular purge of thirty-two administrators, professors, and students at ZAFPA was especially severe.<sup>157</sup> The art academies in general, and ZAFPA in particular, were vulnerable to Party accusations of being bastions of bourgeois liberalism and hotbeds fostering objections to governmental policy. At the same time, these academies were the primary source of the skilled artists who were needed to create monumental works of socialist realist propaganda art. It is not entirely surprising, then, that the academy was both a site of revolutionary destruction and production. While formal classes ceased in 1966, the academy grounds remained populated by professors and students throughout much of the Cultural Revolution. During the early years of the Revolution, the campus of ZAFPA, like the campuses of many elite universities and academies, served as a concentration camp for former professors and administrators. Students and faculty produced the desired Socialist Realist Art as members of renamed revolutionary committees and work units, like the Revolutionary Committee of Zhejiang Worker-Peasant-Soldier Fine Arts

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<sup>156</sup> Jiang Feng, quoted in Pan Tianshou, “Who says Chinese painting must be eliminated? [*Shei shuo ‘Zhongguo-hua biran bei taotai?’*],” *Fine Arts Research* [Meishu Yanjiu], April 1957, in *Selected Documents on 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese Art* [Ershi shiji Zhongguo meishu wenxuan], vol. I, eds. Lang Shaojun and Shui Tianzhong, 19-21 (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2002; and Lü, *A history of art in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century China*, 611.

<sup>157</sup> Zheng “Brushes are Weapons, 95.

Academy, the collective that included *guohua* professors Wang Qingsheng and Shu Chuanxi. Even with this collaboration, many artists were interrogated and physically abused by radical students, sometimes to the point of death. This was the case of sculpture professor Xiao Chuanjiu, who died at the hands of Red Guards in 1968, and the ink painter Pan Tianshou, a former ZAFPA president who was imprisoned in the campus dining hall and publicly denounced for five years beginning in 1966 until his death in 1971.<sup>158</sup>

While the humiliation and torture of targeted intellectuals, professors, artists, and writers continued, there was a national return to artistic production in 1967 in preparation for a large national exhibition in Beijing called Long Live the Victory of Chairman Mao's Revolutionary Line.<sup>159</sup> These works were variations on portraits and history paintings, all depicting Chairman Mao. In Hangzhou, members of the Oil Painting Department of ZAFPA who had not been purged worked collectively on works for this exhibition. As described by the painter Zheng Shengtian, a young graduate of ZAFPA who had been teaching at the academy when the Cultural Revolution began, the components of each painting were assigned based on assumed ideological affiliations:

Two artists were assigned to [my] team: Zhou Ruiwen, a student and member of the anti-revisionism group, and Xu Junxuan, a teacher who was originally in the conservative group but had later turned against it. Because painting was considered a revolutionary task, it was thought that the people who had a higher revolutionary consciousness should... [paint] the most important part of the picture. As a young student, Zhou was given the honor of painting Mao's face. As an "awakened intellectual," Xu was allowed to paint Mao's body. The largest part of the painting – the sky, clouds, and entire background – was left for me, a "bourgeois intellectual" who was still under some measure of surveillance.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Lu Xin, *Pan Tianshou* (Beijing: China Youth Publishing House, 1997), 356-387; and Zheng, "Brushes are Weapons," 97-98.

<sup>159</sup> Zheng, "Brushes are Weapons," 101.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

While collaborative execution of oil painting is nothing new in the history of art, the premise of awarding the more important segments to the more politically correct artists was an important inversion of traditional studio ranking, consistent with the overall goals of the Cultural Revolution. Zheng, who had been detained and imprisoned along with older professors at the onset of the Cultural Revolution, had been released in early 1967 to work in the school cafeteria for several months before being allowed to return to his colleagues in the oil painting department who were undergoing re-education by Red Guards. The hierarchy of painters based on ideology was not as complete in practice as it was in theory. In Zheng's particular example, a painting called *Man's World is Mutable, Seas Become Mulberry Fields: Chairman Mao Inspects the Situation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in Northern, South-Central, and Eastern China* (1967), Zheng was asked by the younger artist Zhou Ruiwen to assist with painting Mao's face and body despite Zheng's "bourgeois" status.<sup>161</sup>

By 1968 ZAFPA was no longer under the control of the Red Guards. Instead, a Workers' Propaganda Team assumed leadership. These teams, deployed to colleges and universities all over China, were made up of uneducated factory workers who were supposed to help transform formerly bourgeois institutions. As in the assignment of painting assignments in the oil painting studios at ZAFPA, the hierarchy placed proletarian and Communist credentials above experience or training. While under the control of the propaganda team, the academy relocated several times in order to expose the faculty and students to the working conditions of ordinary people outside of China's urban centers. First they moved just outside Hangzhou in 1969. In 1970 the propaganda team moved the academy further afield in Zhejiang province to an area near the Fuchun River and

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

mountains that had coincidentally been the late-life retreat of the Song-Yuan dynasty landscape painter and literatus Huang Gongwang (1269-1354) when he retreated from society and devoted himself to Taoist study.<sup>162</sup> After this move, the abandoned Hangzhou campus remained shuttered until after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The Ministry of Culture announced in late 1977 that art institutions like CAFA and ZAFa would be re-opened, and they began to admit new classes of students in 1978, the year that Deng Xiaoping began his economic policies that would usher in the Reform Era. It naturally took several years for the academic apparatus to rebuild, for journals to resume publication, and for the curricula to be redesigned and faculty reassembled.

What is important for our study of new media in the academy is that during these early years of the Reform Era, while the nation's academic institutions were reconvening, the Ministry of Education initiated programs to send Chinese scholars abroad for advanced study as part of Deng's Open Door Policy. Zheng Shengtian, the "bourgeois intellectual" oil painter who had spent final years of the Cultural Revolution recovering from a severe illness contracted in the Fuchun mountains after the forced relocation of ZAFa, sat for a national qualifying exam and was selected as one of the elite group to study abroad in 1981.<sup>163</sup> This was an extremely rare opportunity for a teacher in any discipline, but especially fine art since most of the scholars were sent abroad to study fields that more directly supported the "four modernizations" of industry, defense, agriculture, and science.<sup>164</sup> Zheng received a two-year fellowship at the University of Minnesota, followed by a three-week tour of twelve European countries. He returned to ZAFa in

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>163</sup> Zheng Shengtian, "Preface by Zheng Shengtian," *Materials of the Future: Documenting Chinese Contemporary Art from 1980-1990*, Asia Art Archive, 2011, Web video, accessed 16 March 2012, <http://www.china1980s.org/en/about2.aspx>.

<sup>164</sup> Futao Huang, "Transnational Higher Education: A Perspective from China," *Higher Education Research and Development*. 22, no. 2 (2003): 193-203.

1983, bringing with him hundreds of photographs and slides of Western works of art as well as books and other media that were eagerly consumed by the academy's students and faculty, including the oil painting majors Wu Shanzhuan and Zhang Peili.

### **Zheng Shengtian and ZAFA in the 1980s**

As much recent scholarship has documented, both CAFA and ZAFA became centers of Chinese experimental modernism in the 1980s although by most accounts the official curriculum was extremely restrictive, a blend of elements of Soviet and Beaux-Arts education with no addition of late-twentieth century practices.<sup>165</sup> Zheng Shengtian played an important role in augmenting the academy's studio education programs by providing eager students and faculty with a window to Western modern and contemporary art theory. In addition to his role at ZAFA, he was invited to present at universities and academies all over China. At these engagements Zheng lectured on Western art for extended periods of time, sometimes as long as five hours, to packed rooms.<sup>166</sup>

Zheng quickly rose from his position as a professor in ZAFA's oil painting department to the head of that department, then to an administrative position as head of the Foreign Affairs Office. Even as an administrator, he had little power to change the rigid curriculum based on developing technical skills and honing a realistic, imitative style. These studio courses did not reflect the type of intellectual and artistic development that the population of students was clamoring for, so his solution was to provide extra-curricular opportunities and to populate the library with a rich collection of books and

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<sup>165</sup> Zheng, "Preface by Zheng Shengtian."

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

periodicals on Western art. While he was still a junior professor as the academy was reconvening in 1977, Zheng played an important role in growing the academy's library collection, which he thought would be a key resource for the crush of new students that hoped to study art now that the academy had reopened. The library had not grown much since he himself arrived at the academy in the 1950s, when it had a good but limited assortment of books on Western art history, mostly dating to the early 1930s, many of which were Lin Fengmian's personal contributions. The material was mostly on Renaissance through nineteenth century art, with a small amount on Modern art. While he was a student there was no way to acquire new books from outside of China, but professors who could read English, French, or Russian would periodically translate the foreign books already in the library's collections and publish their translations several times a year. Many of these professors were later punished for these translations during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>167</sup> Aware of how his professors' translation efforts had enriched his own academic experience, he encouraged the academy's administrators to work with entrepreneurial booksellers who had been organizing discipline-specific book fairs around the country in the early Reform Era. Zheng was one of three representatives from ZAFAs sent to Beijing's international bookstore to peruse catalogues of book titles, mostly from Japan and Europe, that would be ordered for an art book fair to be held in Hangzhou from which the academy could acquire new titles.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> "Interview with Zheng Shengtian, 31 October 2009, New York City," *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art 1980-1990* (Asia Art Archive, 2011), Web video, accessed 16 March 2012, [http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\\_detail.aspx?interview\\_id=45](http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=45).

<sup>168</sup> This art book fair is legendary among Chinese students because ZAFAs administrators were credited with selling an academy-owned car in order to finance the purchase of books for use by the students. Zheng Shengtian asserts that the building of the ZAFAs library was extremely important to the intellectual life of the region. It was a unique resource that was used by students and faculty from universities all over the region and nation in addition to academy affiliates. Still, he has also wanted to set the record straight that

In addition to developing the library as a resource, Zheng was able to leverage his position in the academy's Foreign Affairs Office to invite visiting professors to augment the school's course offerings. In the spring of 1985, Zheng invited the Minneapolis-based American artist and art historian Roman Verostko (b.1929) to lead a six-week seminar on modern Western art.<sup>169</sup> This course was attended not just by ZAFAs students but also by faculty from other universities and art academies that wanted to take advantage of this rare opportunity to study with a foreign professor.<sup>170</sup> Later that year Zheng also invited the expatriate artist Zhao Wuji (Zao Wou-ki, b.1920), a ZAFAs alum who had studied with Lin Fengmian and Pan Tianshou. Zhao had graduated in 1941 and had stayed as an instructor in both ink and oil painting until 1947 when he left China for Paris and established himself as a modernist painter. Even more so than with the Verostko seminar, Zhao was on the radar of high-level officials from the academy and the Ministry of Culture, and his presence was treated with diplomatic finesse. The opportunity to study with Zhao was a privilege that was being awarded to professors from art academies around the nation. When presented with his class of around twenty professors instead of art students, Zhao expressed his disappointment to Zheng, who was able to negotiate a compromise with the academy's president. While it was impossible to turn away the professors who had been appointed to the course by the Ministry of Culture, it was deemed acceptable to augment the class with students from Zheng's own painting studio, resulting in a full room of more than thirty people total for the month-long workshop.<sup>171</sup>

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the vehicle that the academy sold to contribute to the library fund was an old, non-functional truck and not a car used for personal transportation by academy officials that they sacrificed to this cause.

<sup>169</sup> Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 412.

<sup>170</sup> Zheng, "Preface by Zheng Shengtian."

<sup>171</sup> "Interview with Zheng Shengtian."



I believe that Zheng's advocacy to bring Roman Verostko and Zhao Wuji to ZAFAs was quite deliberate. He selected these two out of many possible professors and working artists because they invited mediatic experimentation and a conceptual component that he saw as lacking in the academy's curriculum. Verostko's work was directly related to the early twentieth century modernism of artists like Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich that explored abstract forms through manipulations of shape and color, but he was of particular interest to ZAFAs because his practice involved the mediation of painting through computer algorithms and digitally programmed machinery as well as experimenting in purely digital art, sound, and video installations. Verostko had begun his investigations of the possibilities presented by new media technologies in art while a fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT in 1970 in the company of Gyorgy Kepes, and he continued to pursue computerized images when personal computers became available in the early 1980s.<sup>172</sup> He had only very recently begun to use actual computer coding in his artwork when he was asked to teach in Hangzhou. By inviting this obscure professor to lecture on Western art history, a topic that was understood to be relevant and useful to art academy goals although less relevant to Verostko himself, Zheng was also bringing an experimental artist to the academy. Verostko was innovating within a modernist tradition by using leading-edge computing technology as in his *Magic Hand of Chance* (1982-1985), a dynamic series of images generated on a computer monitor as a result of a computer program that Verostko had coded to generate "original improvisations."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ira Greenberg, *Processing: Creative Coding and Computational Art* (Berkeley, CA: Friends of Ed, an Apress Co, 2007), 17.

<sup>173</sup> Roman Verostko, "Epigenetic Painting: Software As Genotype, A New Dimension of Art by Roman Verostko Presented at the First International Symposium on Electronic Art, 1988 (FISEA'88)," Roman Verostko |

Zheng's interest in inviting Zhao Wuji was many-fold, but I believe that the most compelling reason was the way Zhao could bring in his person memories of the openness, tolerance, and experimentation that had governed the art academy in the early 1930s. This was not always ideal since Zhao, unlike Verostko, was well known in China, and thus commanded attention from officials.<sup>174</sup> Like Zheng and Verostko, Zhao could convey a sense of the Euro-American art world in his teaching, but he also served as a bridge to the early twentieth century art practices in China. Since Zhao had missed the imposition of socialist realism as the official style of the People's Republic and had gone into exile during the Cultural Revolution, he was able to convey a preserved mission – to develop Chinese modernism – from his professors Lin Fengmian and Pan Tianshou. As seen in Zhao's works *Vol d'Oiseaux* (1954, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco) and *August 20, 1984* (1985, University of California, San Diego), his style was abstract with remnants of identifiable natural landscape elements. These images are rendered with a range of brushstrokes that show the influence of his training in Chinese ink painting as well as the sweeping gestures of Abstract Expressionism that he encountered in New York, French *informe*, and the lyrical pseudo-naïveté of Paul Klee, one of his great influences. When reflecting on the impact of Zhao's presence at the academy, Zheng stated that it was not a style but a profound conceptual influence felt throughout the academy. Professors at the academy in the Reform Era were still bound to the strict curriculum to teach imitative techniques, and even Zheng himself, as a professor of oil painting, despite his exposure to the multiplicity of styles and media of Western contemporary art, taught within these

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Algorithmic Art Web Site, (Roman Verostko, 2011), accessed 27 March 2012, <http://www.verostko.com/epigenet.html#themeb>.

<sup>174</sup> Zhao attained a quasi-celebrity status in China due to his success as an artist living in France, and he was able to use this status to help secure the release of his former professor Lin Fengmian in 1972. Lin had been imprisoned since 1968 despite having issued self-criticisms and destroyed many of his own artworks. (Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 153-154.)

parameters. Zhao was in a unique position to teach outside of these limits, both because he himself had developed a “free heart,” encouraged by Lin Fengmian, as part of his practice in the 1930s and 1940s and because he had retained this attitude throughout the People’s Republic period when artists in China had adapted to official ideological and mediatic impositions.

For Wu Shanzhuan and his classmates at ZAFA in 1985, the academy was not merely a professional training school, but an environment in which they could develop a critical lens with which to view their culture. Zheng Shengtian’s work to increase the holdings of the ZAFA library and invite guest professors to teach about art and methodologies outside of China was essentially a realization of Dong Qichang’s prescription that artists must read and travel extensively as part of their education. Since it was impossible for students to physically travel outside of China, Zheng shared the knowledge he had gained while traveling abroad and augmented the straightforward technical curriculum with the points of view of artists living and working in the West. Even though the number of students who were able to participate in Verostko’s and Zhao’s seminars was quite small, the presence of these visiting scholars on campus and the discussion of their approaches to art was an important addition to students’ general agitation to deepen and broaden their education.

One last point about Zheng’s impact on ZAFA in the mid-1980s is his defense of the experimental turn taken by many of the oil painting students in the class of 1985. That year’s graduation exhibition featured the work of the painter Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili, who will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.<sup>175</sup> The academy had just

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<sup>175</sup> Although not central to this study, Geng Jianyi is another critically important member of the ’85 Art New Wave who experimented in many mediums after graduating from ZAFA. A member of the Pond

recently implemented a policy that students need not mimic their instructors' style, subject matter, and technique in their own work, allowing them to submit any freely chosen style as their final project.<sup>176</sup> Zheng was excited to see the nontraditional paintings presented in this show, a reflection on this new policy and the experimental atmosphere he had helped to foster during the previous two years: "Prior to the class of '85, all graduation projects were asked to conform to the principles of Soviet Socialist Realism. Every student in Geng Jianyi's class wanted to show their individual approach to content and form, which I encouraged."<sup>177</sup> Despite the academy's invitation for students to experiment outside traditional stylistic boundaries, the experimental work was extremely controversial, both within the academy and in the nation's art world in general. Zheng was summoned before ZAFAs Academic Committee to defend the students' ideologically "incorrect" work. Images of artwork from the exhibition and the ensuing ideological and stylistic debates were covered in the nation's foremost art publications: *Fine Arts (Meishu)*, the journal published by the official Chinese Artists' Association; and *Fine Arts in China (Zhongguo Meishu Bao)*, the journal of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.<sup>178</sup> This controversy signaled that while it was possible to deviate from straightforward artistic conventions in the Reform Era in ways that had been previously inconceivable, it was still a marginalized minority that actually experimented. Despite Zheng's efforts to pluralize ideological opportunities at the academy, it was an uphill

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Society in the late 1980s and a close friend of Zhang Peili, Geng also returned to ZAFAs after the founding of the New Media Art Department with Zhang as department head.

<sup>176</sup> Gao, *Total Modernity*, 105.

<sup>177</sup> Zheng Shengtian, quoted in Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Hong Kong: timezone 8; New York: AW Asia, 2008), 92.

<sup>178</sup> "Zhemaibiyesheng zuopin yinqi zhengyi" ("The graduation work of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts caused debates"), *Zhongguo meishubao*, No.9, 21 (September 1985): 1; "Biyechuangzuo jiaoxue de tihui" ("The experience of graduation teaching"), *Meishu*, No.9, (September 1985): 43-45.

battle to effect change within the rigid Chinese educational system, as he was among the minority of faculty that worked in this direction. Zheng stayed at the academy for one more year before leaving at the end of 1986 to assume a teaching post at San Diego State University. Zheng's final year was Wu Shanzhuan's senior year, and the next section will explore Wu's experimentation with installation art at this time.

### **75% Red**

In order to fully understand Wu Shanzhuan's initial experimentation with installation, we must recontextualize his experience at the academy within the larger framework of Reform Era China. The period of openness and experimentation at ZAFU, encouraged by Zheng Shengtian was part of a nation-wide opening in the arts soon to be named the '85 Art Movement<sup>179</sup>, which emerged following official decrees and new cultural policies put in place around 1984. These policies, concerning increased freedom of expression, were aimed at the literary and artistic elites, a population that Deng Xiaoping saw as necessary for China's overall economic prosperity. This policy shift toward greater tolerance of experimentation in the arts and literature, however, was just the latest installment in a series of post-cultural revolution cultural mandates. Deng Xiaoping's initial 1978 economic reforms and "thought emancipation" opened China to previously banned artifacts of Western culture, including art, literature, history, philosophy, and film, as well as commercial goods. In the art world, this resulted in the

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<sup>179</sup> The term "85 Art Movement", first used in early 1986, contains the politically charged term "movement" (*yundong*). This name was later altered to "85 New Wave" to avoid the use of the problematic term and possible unnecessary attention from party officials. Since then, the terms have been used more or less interchangeably in English-language accounts of the time, but I have chosen to use the original name in keeping with the overtly political consciousness of the artists. Interestingly, the inaugural exhibition at newly opened Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing was entitled "85 New Wave – The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art," but the exhibition materials refer to the movement as the "85 New Wave Art Movement."

first major unofficial art exhibitions, organized by the Stars group in 1979 and 1980. In the literary realm, a strain of post-revolutionary humanism emerged that delved into the problematic of “socialist alienation.”<sup>180</sup> This first period of liberalization in the arts that saw the public production of artwork and literature that was overtly critical of Party policies was soon halted. Reactionary forces within the Party were displeased with the Western ideas that had taken hold so quickly in among the nation’s educated elite. The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement (1982-1984) was launched by the Party against experimental art and literature, claiming that liberalization in the cultural sphere had caused a new bevy of social ills like crime and corruption.<sup>181</sup> During this period official exhibitions and art periodicals showed only official socialist realist artwork, reminiscent of the singular standards upheld during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>182</sup>

Deng’s 1984 policy shift courting the elite intellectual population opened with the removal of the Cultural Revolution-era officials who had launched the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign. It was met with understandable skepticism on the part of many avant-garde artists who left behind the threads of optimistic humanism that had characterized their work in the late 1970s, and only cautiously approached this new opening. Nonetheless, many artists welcomed the shift, and Deng’s policies were matched with new calls for innovation and individualization in the arts by senior art-world figures, many of whom were leaders of artists’ organizations in China’s extensive arts bureaucracy. New arts periodicals emerged; old ones, including official publications, underwent editorial changes, publishing articles on the importance of artistic freedom

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<sup>180</sup> Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 12.

<sup>181</sup> Christopher Hudson, *The China Handbook: Regional handbooks of economic development: prospects onto the 21st century* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 304.

<sup>182</sup> Andrews, “Fragmented Memory,” 8.

and openness to the outside world. These periodicals also promoted new art by young artists that presented a clear challenge to the status quo.<sup>183</sup> Wu and his colleagues at ZAFAs were among the young artists who were featured in this new breed of art journal, which published images and exhibition reviews of student artwork as well as emerging artists' own writings, musings, and manifestos.

These periodicals sometimes profiled individual artists, but more often they chronicled the numerous unofficial (and often informal) artistic groups that had sprung up all over China and put them in touch with each other in a way that previous generations had never been. At a 1986 conference in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, geared toward taking stock of the previous year's artistic activity, Gao Minglu (a 1981 graduate of the Tianjin Academy of Fine Art who had gone on to pursue an MA in Chinese Art History at the China Arts Research Academy in Beijing) declared that the art of the '85 New Wave was defined as: spontaneous and self-organized, group-oriented, rebellious, experimental, and influenced by Western modernist forms.<sup>184</sup> The "group-oriented" nature of the work is not surprising considering most of the artists involved were current or recent students at China's many art academies, who, like many students in other disciplines at the time, had taken their education into their own hands, constantly discussing and debating the ideas in the newly-available flood of Western history, philosophy, and art books amongst their peers. Also, as artists' individual rights were not guaranteed even in an era of relaxed government intervention, group exhibitions were politically safer, decreasing the chances that any one artist would be singled out. In Wu's case, there are additional layers to his group-oriented approach. Cultural Revolution

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

references that color his early installation work highlight his interest in unpacking the social history of that era, including its collaborative and anonymous artwork and the chaotic, palimpsestic visual environments that colored most public spaces at that time. In addition, his collaborations related to his internalization of Popperian logic and philosophy that, once created, objects exist in and of themselves, and are not the intellectual property of any individual.

Wu Shanzhuan and his colleagues Huang Jian, Lu Haizhou, Luo Xianyue, Ni Haifeng, Song Chenghua and Zhang Haizhou from ZAFa formed one of these loose collectives, and together they executed two “self-organized...[and] rebellious” installations in Zhoushan, Wu’s home island off the Zhejiang coast, slightly removed from the provincial capital of Hangzhou. The collective’s installations, both entitled *75% Red, 20% White, 5% Black*, were held as private exhibitions in 1985 and 1986, the first in an unused Buddhist temple and the second at the Institute of Mass Culture, a public organization in Wu’s hometown of Zhoushan where he taught basic art classes to local fisherman and their children.<sup>185</sup>

In the first collective installation environment entitled *75% Red, 20% White, 5% Black* (1985), the components of painted wood and canvas are more or less in the realm of the two-dimensional, but the use of the space is complicated by the addition of large circular medallions on the floor of the space, some flush with the floor and some slightly raised off the ground. Large red painted canvases bearing images of bold, black Chinese characters of various sizes and the yin-yang symbol in black and white are propped up against the walls of the space, a large room originally used as the Buddhist temple’s

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<sup>185</sup> “Wu Shanzhuan: Interview by *South China Morning Post* journalist Joyce Lau,” (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2003), unpublished DVD.



assembly hall. The installation is by no means seamless, and the parts of the wall not covered by these propped canvases are left untreated. The medallions on the floor (also untreated) are wooden circles painted red with inscribed black triangles and squares, some with black or white characters written on them. They are arranged to form a yin-yang, a circle with inscribed interlocking commas, a shape found in Daoist and Buddhist visual culture representative of universal balance.

The largest character visible in the documentary photograph of this installation, the visible half of a two-character phrase that is truncated in this image, is *shen* (神), a character used to mean “god,” “spirit,” “soul” or sometimes “God.” The painting visible in the upper left corner of the photograph, a yin-yang surrounded by eight characters in white circles, reminiscent of the *ba gua* (literally “eight areas”), a map of elemental forces used in Daoist visual cosmology, usually represented with a series of trigrams. Although the one available installation photograph does not present a clear picture of all of the paintings and the textual messages imbedded in them, it is clear that the group’s installation is making use of a pseudo-religious semiotics, invoking the exhibition space’s previous incarnation as a sacred space but overlaying the official-looking color scheme and typography of the Cultural Revolution. These Daoist, Buddhist, and Cultural-Revolution-era Communist references are all squarely Chinese. But, they are all merged and conflated in this space that has been rededicated to Reform-era unofficial contemporary art, highlighting an important recurring trope in Wu Shanzhuan’s individual work pursued after this initial collective experimentation: the cultural, textual, ideological, and visual legacies of the socio-political world are all equally present and equally nonsensical.

The second incarnation of the *75% Red* installation (1986) took place in a more formalized space, hermetically sealed from the outside world, which begins to evoke the interiority we will see in Wu's own installation work. The room, which we are told is 6x10x4 meters, is a large but not cavernous space, covered entirely with the three signature colors. The floor and ceiling are covered in red, and the walls are plastered from top to bottom in paper painted with red, black, and white symbols and large, fractured, or sideways characters. The back wall is covered with a centered composition dominated by the orthogonal lines of a slightly phallic arrangement of black squares, where the center square is just slightly larger than the symmetrical pair on either side. These side squares are inscribed each with a large red circle, each of which is inscribed with a small white square whose sides are parallel to the lines of the larger black square and the room. This simple arrangement of basic geometric forms invokes the shape of traditional Chinese coins. In the large, central, black square, the artists have inscribed a smaller white square onto which they have painted some of the basic strokes used to write Chinese characters. The black outer strokes, which resemble an "L" and an upside-down, backwards "L", come together to form another square shape, and the central red stroke (*pie*, 丿) slopes from upper right to a tapered point at the bottom left. Instead of forming a readable character, the outer strokes create a frame for the *pie*, which, isolated from any readable meaning, becomes an abstract form.

Despite the civic secularity of its location, the entire central composition again mimics aspects of Buddhist iconography. Here, the resemblance is to the central altar found in most Buddhist temples: the main Buddha sculpture sits on a pedestal flanked on each side by two identical sculptural elements, usually Bodhisattvas or pagodas. The

centrality and elevation of the *pie* form in place of the Buddha speaks to the overall disruption of visual expectations in this space. The characters in the installation confound legibility – they are not readable words. Instead, they are fractured, reoriented, and presented as graphic manipulations of lines rather than bearers of meaning. Despite being in a three dimensional space, the installation remains squarely in the realm of the two dimensional and the visual, and the materials are limited to poster color and ink on paper, the components of the genres of painting, drawing and printmaking.

The question then arises as to whether these are simply exhibitions that have been installed in a particular way, or whether they actively engage the medium of installation art as it was then emerging in Western art, a genre that these artists were certainly knowledgeable about thanks to the materials available through ZAFAs. That is, is this mediatic exploration a conscious attempt to levy a critique at the static, Party-sanctioned art world, similar to the manner in which Western artists explored installation art as an implicit critique of the art market and a way to problematize questions of genre, medium, and concept? I believe that the group's refusal to utilize their technical skills as Socialist Realist painters is indeed an admonitory gesture and a critique of the elite art education they had received. With this refusal to employ academic painting techniques, the 75% *Red* installations also owe a debt to Dada, Constructivism, and other early European Modernist explorations of form, color, and space. These were all important steps away from academic conventions, but the truly critical device employed by these artists was the exploration of Chinese characters and their forms in this modernist visual vocabulary.

This move to re-incorporate the Chinese written language, or at least a suggestion of the written word, into fine art works on several levels. Not only had the Communist Party altered Chinese written language by introducing increasing numbers of simplified

characters in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but the Cultural Revolution had made constant public use of written language as a means of censure and control: on posters, shame boards, and banners. The 75% *Red* artists were working in the aftermath of this loaded past; their laboratorial deconstruction of characters into illegible component shapes is a means by which they pull these characters out of the world of politics and into a space of aesthetic contemplation. At the same time, this allows these contemporary artists to re-inhabit the role of traditional Chinese literati and their text-heavy artistic practice relying on a firm understanding of painting, poetry, and politics. In addition to this general history of literati art that fused calligraphy, painting, and couched messages of dissent and admonition, one specific practice that merits mention in this study is spirit writing – the Daoist practice of automatic writing either in sand or on paper. In this practice, the writer-participants are the mediums through which the spirits convey their messages in textual form. This practice of ostensibly channeling moral messages from the spirit world was adopted by many late Qing literati and was continued into the twentieth century and the Republican era as a group activity practiced all over China. In this incarnation, practitioners pluralized the supposed spirit sources to include Buddhist deities, Confucius and many of his deceased followers, Jesus, Mohammed, and occasionally political or literary personalities.<sup>186</sup> This practice became a generalized spiritual exercise, practiced both by secular groups like the Society for Awakening to Goodness (founded in 1919 in Beijing) and in Buddhist temples like the one that was repurposed in Zhoushan.<sup>187</sup> Spirit writing is important when considering the operations

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<sup>186</sup> Vincent Goossaert, and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 97; James Miller, *Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 135.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

that Wu and the 75% *Red* artists perform on language as it was a means of both expressing moral and often admonitory messages while simultaneously avoiding agency and invoking the authority of deities or important deceased historical figures. The 75% *Red* works similarly invoke the authority of Official text and religious symbols and avoid attribution by hiding inside collective authorship and a standardized style.

While the 75% *Red* artists were not explicit regarding modern Chinese artistic practices, we are given a clue in Wu's writings that touch on Chinese written language and its unique position in linguistic and aesthetic realms. This piece on the group work 75% *Red*, 20% *White*, 5% *Black* was published in a 1987 issue of *Meishu Sichao (Art Trends)*, a journal published in Wuhan by the Hubei provincial branch of the Chinese Artists' Association that was shut down later that year for its controversial articles by young artists and critics:

... The aim [of our group] is to view Chinese typography and the unique phenomenon of the Chinese written word within the world linguistic family from the perspective of aesthetic beauty...

If we are [creating] conceptual art, it is based on the concept that the aesthetic forms of Chinese typography in themselves exist as works of art; rather than on the concept of Chinese characters as linguistic expressions. In this way our conceptual art differs from Western conceptual 'World Art,' which emphasizes the concepts expressed by language.

Finally, I ground our painting on this foundation – that it is a form of 'new' pure art that extends artistic language. Artistic language always plays a crucial role in the fate of art history, and as such the value of the artist lies in his creation and discovery of an artistic language (that's why Kandinsky and Duchamp have been so inspirational to us).

Given this, I think the crucial reason for the humorous effect of our work on the audience is as follows: when we realize Chinese characters as forms of pure beauty on the canvas, the audience still recognizes them as a language that expresses a concept; in other words, the humor lies in the fact that these pure forms of 'Chinese characters' constitute at the same time a kind of language that expresses meaning, but it is a language that does not correspond to the established codes of meaning for Chinese characters.

As for color, red is for our memories... people have viewed the past through aesthetic eyes ... the Cultural Revolution was an extremist movement, it utilized the color red more than any other movement in human history... 75% Red, 20% Black, 5% White is only a slogan, a framework through which people can view the display.

-Wu Shanzhuan, "On Our Painting," in *Meishu Sichao (Art Trends)*, 1987, issue 1<sup>188</sup>

The language of this treatise is remarkably specific. He briefly, noncommittally, uses the term "conceptual art" at the beginning of the passage to frame their explorations of typographic forms, but then subsequently refers to their work as "painting," instead of the more general term "art." In the concluding paragraph of the above quote, he refers to the work as a "display," but at no point does he refer to it as "installation." This does not mean that the medium of installation was insignificant to Wu and his collaborators, but it does imply that this genre is perhaps just one facet of their overall project, a means by which they could visually manifest their conceptual program and disengage from the world at large.

The experience that the *75% Red* artists created with their installation can only be imagined, but photographs suggest panoramic vision and graphic experimentation rather than corporeal manipulation. Examining Ilya Kabakov's (b. 1933) contemporaneous writing describing his use of the medium of installation to create a "total installation," we see his goal was one of total sensory and psychological engulfment. In his words, "the main motor of the total installation... [is] the cranking up of the wheel of associations, cultural or everyday analogies, personal memories."<sup>189</sup> Kabakov harnesses these types of associations by employing actual found objects and composing his installations with an

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<sup>188</sup> Wu Shanzhuan and Inga Svala Thorsdottir, *Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humour International* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2005), Insert, Artists' Writings 07.

<sup>189</sup> Ilya Kabakov (1992) from Ilya Kabakov, "On the "Total Installation" (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995), quoted in Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: a critical history* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 16.

element of theatricality, and creating an experiential narrative, as in *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* (1981-1988). In comparison, the *75% Red* installations work in the opposite manner. The artists have transformed familiar spaces by ridding them of their recognizable objects, and have installed paintings that render otherwise familiar, readable signs into mute graphic forms. This alien environment could also be seen as a “total installation,” but the result is not one of layered personal and cultural references, but of a stark, unrecognizable visual milieu.

While the *75% Red* artists might not have been aware of Kabakov’s work specifically, they were certainly aware of the practice of creating installations using found objects and the shift away from aesthetically isolated art installations to those which shared a common vocabulary with quotidian environments. Their choice to ignore that trajectory implies that the medium of installation as it had lately evolved in the the Soviet and Western contexts was not of primary concern when compared with their individual project of artistic exploration and experimentation, which is still remarkably grounded in their identity as painters, albeit in poster paint rather than oil. This is no surprise given the rigorous program in painting that they had all followed at ZAFPA. Even though this program had been augmented by Zheng Shengtian’s additional educational resources that invited new and different artistic approaches, they were still so fluent in the language of two-dimensional artistic creation that their mediatic experimentations began there. In the next section, I will explore Wu’s iconic early installation work *Red Humor*, examining the ways in which this solo exploration of the medium of installation goes further toward an inhabitation of traditional literati practices of subtle dissent and criticism within an absurd Modernist visual discourse.

## ***Red Humor***

Installation art is a genre that exists at the borders and intersections of architecture, sculpture, and two-dimensional representation, all of which are academic subjects, with the latter two categories major courses of study in China's art academies. In Wu Shanzhuan's case, the practice of installation has allowed him to materialize a larger conceptual project while flexing the academic artistic vocabulary that he learned at ZAFU. As with the 75% works, *Red Humor* (1986) relies upon the conceptual fungibility of painting and the written word as used by traditional literati. In so doing, he is able to present a series of subtle and high-reaching critiques cached inside a seemingly nonsensical and naïve amalgamation of colors and words.

In 1986, simultaneous to his collaborations on the *75% Red, 20% Black 5% White* series (also the year of his graduation from ZAFU), Wu began working on his installation *Red Humor* in his Zhoushan studio. This installation was later offered at a more public venue – the Zhejiang Museum in Hangzhou – also in 1986. This piece gained international notoriety with its inclusion in the 1998 exhibition curated by the '85 Art New Wave's primary promoter Gao Minglu – *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. This exhibition was held in New York (exhibited at PS 1 and the Asia Society) and San Francisco (SF MoMA). The photographs documenting the successive iterations of *Red Humor* are indistinguishable, implying that despite its chaotic appearance, the piece is composed of a set of modularized panels that are easily reassembled as long as the venue can accommodate the original dimensions of the work rather than being reinstalled as a site-specific work. The piece is composed of a room plastered on each face with text fragments from a variety of sources, some in quick, messy handwriting, some in the simple, thick, boldface type associated with the authority of political announcements and



slogans handed down by the Central committee. The color scheme is red, white, and black, with red dominating the other two, although at no point are the viewers presented with the type of clean, purely red surface they would have found in the second installation of *75% Red, 20% Black 5% White* (1986).

The jumble of words and phrases contribute to the overall illegibility of *Red Humor*. In addition to pieces of paper bearing text being pasted over and cutting off other texts, some words are blacked out, smudged, crossed out, splattered with paint, and otherwise visually compromised. Wu adds unexplained circles, X's and arrows to the mix, as if connecting the messages with some larger narrative, although ultimately there is none. Some of the banners are installed upside down or sideways. Even the four large characters on the floor, seemingly clear and authoritative, are surprisingly hard to read, alternatively interpreted as “*wu shuo ba dao*” (“talking rubbish”) and “*wu ren shuo dao*” (“no one can interpret it”). While these are not wildly divergent in meaning or connotation, it is interesting to note this in light of other purposefully unreadable characters being used during this period by Wu and other '85 Movement artists. The visual ambiguity of the characters (specifically the bottom left character, which has been interpreted as both 人 (*ren*) and 八 (*ba*)), is related to Wu's concurrent work on “nonsense” characters, another part of his *Red Humor* series. These works relate to the 1977 “resimplification” of Chinese written language under the ultraconservative Chairman Hua Guofeng who tried to continue the legacy of Mao and the Cultural Revolution with his own brand of revolutionary policies. In an attempt to make literacy more prevalent by reducing the already simplified characters even further, characters became virtually unreadable, as they were simplified to the point where similar characters could not be distinguished one

from the other. The program was completely abandoned after a few years. Wu, however, was able to take from this process a keen interest in the form of characters as separated from their meaning.

The other legible texts in *Red Humor* are unrelated and wildly varying in content, including Buddhist sutras, commercial tag lines, Cultural Revolution-era and contemporary political slogans, jokes, and lines from medical texts.<sup>190</sup> Two of the clearest pieces of text are on the right wall. The first, pasted sideways, reads “*zui hou de wan can*” (“the last supper”), an important religious event in the Christian tradition and an iconic painting in the Western art history canon, a phrase that looks bizarrely incongruous in blocky, bold red typeface. The next, just above it looks as if it were quickly written by hand, reading “*Lao Wang: Wo hui jia le*,” (“Mr. Wang: I went home”).

This nonlinear, non-narrative onslaught of words, presented in an all-over composition presents an interesting re-presentation of visual elements that might almost be ready-mades from the mundane world, but upon closer inspection are a coherent series of Wu’s flat works. Rather than redefining the physical space of a standard room and the viewer’s place in relationship to that space, his machinations are in the realm of the two-dimensional and the visual. With his exclusive use of the flat surfaces of the walls, ceiling, and floor, Wu has kept his work grounded in the realm of two-dimensional composition, but his use of text and simple linear symbols destabilizes his relationship to painting and other pictorial arts. The pictorial, however, is restored by the way in which the overloading of textual elements gives way to a visual jumble of red, black and white lines, a coherent incoherence colored by the visual vernacular of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>190</sup> Norman Bryson, “The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde,” in *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 55.

Chinese written word. By mixing authoritative slogans and casual correspondence, he conflates the worlds of graphic design, print journalism, official banners, and sloppy handwriting of different scales. The information that might be conveyed by these messages gives way to an overall composition of red, white, and black.

The current of admonition in this work is strong, as *Red Humor* is essentially an interiorization of Cultural Revolution era public visual culture and its inhumane treatment of many innocent people. Wu's extensive layering of posters and the use of hand-written signs in red, white, and black strongly evokes the walls covered by Red Guards with big character posters (*da zi bao*, 大字报). These walls of posters, emblematic of the type of adolescent zeal that made the Cultural Revolution possible, were continuously in flux as students hastily wrote and pasted up new revolutionary slogans and counter-revolutionary denunciations. In this sense, Wu is simply employing the visual vocabulary of his youth, bringing this unruly, spontaneous visual culture into a space of artistic consumption. The installation, however, is by no means a ready-made or a mere act of curation, as he has taken the practice into the present day. Wu created the posters himself, including words and phrases from different points in Chinese history, and installing them sideways and upside down, implicitly critiquing the logic of radical politics by exchanging political messages for inconsistent and diverse soundbites. He has also created a space that lacks the chaos of the street-level political orations of the Cultural Revolution. By creating a five-sided room with posters covering all five sides, he has created a new type of privatized space, a hermetic cave meant for a limited audience as opposed to an open urban environment. This is perhaps the most profound act of admonition, by removing the posters and walls from the context of zealous Cultural

Revolution cacophony he reveals the inherent absurdity and immorality of the Red Guards and their political ringleaders. Wu has spoken in a very limited fashion about his own experience as a sent-down student who learned to farm during the Cultural Revolution, and how his father was “not treated too good.”<sup>191</sup> It is certain that he was aware of the legacy of the Cultural Revolution as it pertained to ZAFAs and many of his professors who had been rehabilitated in the Reform Era, and that this work reflects his profound disapproval.

In the piece published in *Meishu Sichao* concerning the *75% Red* series, Wu has given a few clues as to his historical influences when he mentions “inspiration” drawn from Wassily Kandinsky and Marcel Duchamp because of their “creation and discovery” of an “artistic *language*” (my emphasis). The inspiration taken from these seminal artists in the Western Modern canon is no doubt related to their importance at watershed moments in the aesthetic and artistic history of their cultures: Kandinsky evolved from a painter of Impressionist-influenced landscapes to one of pure abstraction, and Duchamp introduced the revolutionary practice of employing ready-made objects as stand-alone sculpture. Wu’s practice to develop his own artistic vernacular that would be equally radical in his own specific cultural context, a self-conscious watershed moment already branded as an intellectual and artistic movement.

It is the less visible influence of classical Chinese art that helps situate Wu’s installation works as a new iteration on the theme of admonition. First, we must take into account that the foundations of the Chinese art academy system in the early twentieth century were based on creating an atmosphere in which Chinese and Western art might be appropriately synthesized to best represent modern China. Lin Fengmian’s goals to

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<sup>191</sup> “Wu Shanzhuan: Interview.”

do so were rooted in his own access to works of Classical Chinese art in European museum collections that he saw for the first time while studying abroad.<sup>192</sup> In the Reform Era, the curricula and library provided students with ample access to classical Chinese art and theory as a matter of course. The impact of this information, however, was conceptual rather than stylistic, not unlike Zheng Shengtian's assessment of the influence of Zhao Wuji's seminar. The fact that it existed at all was downplayed in the face of the overwhelming affinity that ZAFAs artists had for modern and contemporary Western art and literature.

Wu's subtle application of traditional literati moralizing in his work is so oblique that many of his colleagues have failed to grasp it, asserting that his work is completely Western.<sup>193</sup> Hints that he views himself as a cultural critic in the lineage of traditional Confucian scholars have surfaced in many of Wu's reflections upon his reputation among his colleagues who have described his oeuvre as completely Western, a label that he sees as concerned with form rather than meaning.<sup>194</sup> I believe that his focus on Chinese characters and language in his installations speaks directly to his self-identification as an observer of Chinese culture and society. It is the application of his elite status as an educated member of the intellectual class that he uses to engage the written word. He simultaneously obfuscates this classical, scholarly role by overlaying a pseudo-scientific vocabulary to describe the visual impact of characters as graphic forms. In Wu's obfuscating words:

Whether we are speaking of the function of the written word in forming the cognitive methods of a people, or the impact of the written word in shaping the psychology of a people, from either perspective the Chinese language presents an

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<sup>192</sup> Lindy Joubert, *Educating in the Arts: The Asian Experience, Twenty-Four Essays (Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects, Vol 11)* (Dordrecht, NL: Springer-Verlag Netherlands, 2007), 41.

<sup>193</sup> "Wu Shanzhuan: Interview."

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

exceptional paradigm.... Its strictly mono-syllabic phonetic system and the unique physical structure of the Chinese logographic form combine to strongly isolate the Chinese language within the world family of languages. If a written language is the key to unlocking the soul of a people, then losing the “key” of Chinese characters is tantamount to locking the soul of a powerful people inside a vault.... Essentially, the Chinese character is an “expressive” word; on a purely visual level, however, it is a word whose physical composition is formulated according to a strict structural system. Within the confines of the square-word format, the basic strokes conjure forth 49,000 magical structures (the number of characters in the *Kangxi* dictionary). Just on this point alone, we can say that the Chinese people have created 49,000 forms of beauty.<sup>195</sup>

He presents himself as an insider and an outsider, an amateur linguist and social philosopher, all the while skirting the classical Chinese artistic practices that combine painting, poetry and politics in a manner that is conceptually similar to his own art.

The most stable example of Wu’s use of the written word in *Red Humor* (*Hongse Youmo*, 红色幽默) is the title itself, which merits discussion as a fundamental component of this installation work. The color red has multiple connotations in China most notably as the traditional color of celebration and prosperity and the color associated with the international socialist and communist movements and the Chinese Communist Party and army. During the Cultural Revolution, this color term became especially labored, as it was used constantly to label people, concepts, and institutions as politically “correct” as opposed to the “incorrect” or bourgeois connotation that would result in the label of black. Also worth considering is the legacy of the color red in the history of modern art, specifically the formal experiments with basic shapes and colors by the Russian Supremetist Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), and the multiple connotations of the title his 1925 painting *Red Square*. In this title, Malevich simultaneously referred to the public square in Moscow of the same name, the double entendre of “red” signifying “beautiful” in Russian, and Russian revolutionary communist politics. The subtitle for this work is

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<sup>195</sup> Wu Shanzhuan, “On Chinese,” in *Meishu*, 1985, issue 8, reprinted in Wu and Thorsdottir, *Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humour International*, Artists’ Writings 03.

*Painterly Realism, Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*, a reference to the art historical genre of portraiture the the artist's role of mediation, overlaid onto the non-objective monochromatic abstract composition.<sup>196</sup> Wu was familiar with the abstract painting of Malevich, and the formal similarities between the *75% Red...* works' use of two-dimensional paintings and Malevich's 1915 *Last Exhibition of Futurist Paintings 0,10* are an interesting comparison. In *...0,10*, Malevich collaborated with Vladimir Tatlin and Ivan Puni, and the group performed a similar operation to the *75% Red...* artists by playing with cultural-religious conventions and making strange an otherwise familiar setting. In the case of the *0,10* the documentary photograph of Malevich's works reveals abstract paintings composed of monochromatic geometric shapes on two walls, with a black square painting occupying the room's upper corner – the traditional place reserved for the display of religious icons.<sup>197</sup>

The second component of Wu Shanzhuan's title, humor, provides another window into the admonitory nature of his work and artistic mission. Historically, the term humor, *youmo* (幽默), appeared in China in the 1930s as part of a literary movement and cultural trend connected with China's modernization and encounter with Western conceptions of humor, a distinct concept from the traditional Chinese *huaji* (滑稽) which corresponds more to "amusing" or "laughable" in English.<sup>198</sup> The key figure in the cultural fascination with humor was the essayist Lin Yutang and his circle that published

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<sup>196</sup>Rainer Crone, Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 119.

<sup>197</sup>John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors: A Visual History of Titles* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1997), 171.

<sup>198</sup>Jocelyn Valerie Chey and Jessica Milner Davis, eds., *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 3; Qian Suoqiao, "Discovering Humour in Modern China: the launching of the *Analects Fortnightly* Journal and the 'Year of Humour,' (1933)" in *ibid.*, 191.

*Analects Fortnightly* (*Lunyu Banyuekan*, 论语半月刊), a journal featuring humorous, tongue-in-cheek, and satirical writings, beginning in 1932.<sup>199</sup> That the group chose the name of the Confucian classic on moral and political philosophy was both a playful gesture and a connection to their editorial program of publishing examples of humor written by pre-modern figures like Confucius, the Tang poet Li Bai, and the Qing general Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) alongside contemporary cultural commentators.<sup>200</sup> Wu Shanzhuan adopted this conceptual collage technique employed in *Analects Fortnightly* and similar satirical literary journals of Republican Era in his work *Red Humor*, but he also employs the *huaji* tradition with direct linkage to Confucian literati. This tradition is moderated by Confucian dictates on propriety, that humor, or perhaps more precisely “amusing delight” should be: moderate, private, tasteful, useful, and benign.<sup>201</sup> With these descriptors as a guide, it becomes clear that Wu’s *Red Humor* employs humor in this Confucian, constructive manner – applying censure without naming individuals or rehashing appalling violence. Perhaps most importantly, the Confucian idiom is evident in the practice of his work in a “benign” realm of art, slightly apart from the real political movements that were gaining traction around him that would come to a head in the violent crackdown of student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

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<sup>199</sup> Charles A. Laughlin, *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 106.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>201</sup> Xu, Weihe, “The Classical Confucian Concepts of Human Emotion and Proper Humour,” in Chey, Jocelyn Valerie, and Jessica Milner Davis. *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, p.49.



## **Installation and the novelty of new media**

Wu's specific uptake of installation art in the 1980s presents an important continuation of traditional Chinese critical art practices rather than a haphazard adoption of a Western contemporary art medium. This mediatic break with his academic training is particularly important given the legacy of strict cultural policy and ideological pressure to work in specific mediums, styles, and genres from the 1940s onward. Wu was not alone in developing a non-academic artistic practice during the Reform Era, but it is important to understand that the groups of artists concerned with this type of art practice were all educated in traditional art academies with rigid curricula. At the academy in Hangzhou, Zheng Shengtian helped to foster conditions that might encourage students to develop their own practice outside the prescribed norms. He helped to grow the academy's library, which became a broad and deep resource for Western and Chinese art history, and invited in guest professors who, like himself, could share knowledge of the Euro-American art world along with their own art practices that extended far beyond the limits of the academy's curriculum. In making these subtle but meaningful additions to the educational environment at the academy, Zheng was making bold connections to China's pre-Communist past. His importation of these foreign resources was both an act of connecting to the mission of the academy as founded by Lin Fengmian and Cai Yuanpei during the Republic of China era and a way of engaging with a variation of the classical Chinese literati-artist's education based on extensive reading and travel (albeit travel by proxy). The liberal educational environment fostered by Lin and Cai in the early twentieth century had drawn criticism almost immediately from important cultural players like Lu Xun and the many artists that carried out his leftist artistic vision. Moreover, Lin and Cai had been outright condemned by official arts leaders in the era of

Mao Zedong. Mao's cultural policies as articulated at Yan'an were made more explicit during the Cultural Revolution, to the exclusion and condemnation of Cai and Lin. Zheng's reconnection with Lin's pedagogy based on experimentation and individual artistic development was not completely isolated given the other liberalizing initiatives in academia that gained traction during the Reform Era, but it was contested and questioned by the representatives of leftist orthodoxy that still made up the majority of Chinese administrative bodies in the 1980s. Efforts to incorporate more Western-leaning cultural policies were regarded with an amount of suspicion but also deemed necessary as part of the overall national project of opening up and modernizing. Efforts to connect to China's Confucian past in an effort to more precisely engage Chinese cultural issues were even more fraught, both for officials and for the generally Modernist and Europhilic artists themselves. This is obvious in the lack of classical Chinese references in Wu's plentiful writings published on his early installation works. The re-positioning of a late-twentieth century textual visual environment into the world of art in a work like *Red Humor*, however, begs a closer analysis with respect to the traditional Chinese scholar-artist and his fusion of poetry, painting, and political criticism couched in the language of earnest naïveté.

These examples of Wu's experimentation with the new medium of installation were in many ways chronicles of a developing practice at the intersections of two-dimensional art and three-dimensional space. In the next chapter, I will explore the implications of a different kind of "new" medium: video. Video art was a completely different visual tangent. The medium's distinct technological bearing and the fairly brief, direct genealogy that connects it to Fluxus practices of the 1960s make its adoption in China somewhat more consistent with video art practices in the West. China's extremely

limited history of television broadcasting, a state-controlled enterprise from its inception, complicates this narrative, and the negotiation of the medium of television as a device for societal and governmental critique was an important background for Zhang Peili's early experimentation with video as a fine art medium. These mediatic negotiations played out alongside the feverish cultural developments in other mass media during the Reform Era. With this in mind, one can begin to situate the exceptional critical tools that Zhang and Wu developed at ZAFa within the context of more mainstream Chinese cultural history and the persistent Confucian critical practices that manifested throughout the intellectual realm of the 1980s.

## Chapter 4

### Cultural Fevers in the Reform Era, *New Media Broadcasting*, and Zhang Peili's Video Art

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*We must take steps to accelerate the development of modern media of education, including radio and television. Broadcasting offers an important means of developing education with greater, faster, better, and more economical results, and we should take full advantage of it.*<sup>202</sup>

-Deng Xiaoping, speech at the National Conference on Education, 1978

*Right now in China's intellectual and cultural circles there is a tide of interest in discussing culture. Participating in this discussion are the older generation of scholars as well as middle-aged experts. What is especially stimulating is that many promising young scholars have entered this discussion. They are all pondering the problems raised by modernization. Their thoughts all concentrate on one point, namely: can China's ancient culture in modern times bring forth a new spring? Do we dare to respond to the challenge offered us by modern Western culture? Culture calls out to philosophy, and philosophy has fallen in love with culture. The philosophy of culture is becoming a field that attracts people's attention.*<sup>203</sup>

-Bao Zunxin, Introduction to the Philosophy of Culture book series, 1986

*A Chinese proverb says xian zhan, hou zou: first "execute" then "report" [to the emperor]. It seems to me this was rather back to front. Surely protocol is to first come up with a report and announce your intention to execute an action.*<sup>204</sup>

-Zhang Peili, on *About X? Exhibition Procedures*, 1987

The three above quotes frame this chapter's discussion of new media art, specifically Zhang Peili's *30x30*, and its place in the intellectual and educational sphere of the Reform Era. Deng Xiaoping addressed the National Conference on Education in April 1978, the very dawn of the Reform Era, stating that the nation's priority should be to improve the quality of education, raise teaching standards, and draw from the strengths of the intellectual classes who had suffered unnecessarily at the hands the Gang

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<sup>202</sup> Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 124.

<sup>203</sup> Bao Zunxin, introduction to Xie Xuanjun, *Myths and National Spirit (Shenhua yu minzu jingshen)*, Philosophy of Culture Book Series (Wenhua zhaxue congshu) (Shandong Arts and Literature Press (Shandong wenyi chubanshe), 1986), quoted in Su Xiaokang, "Arousing the Whole Nation to Self-Questioning – a Few Words on the Design of the Television Series *Deathsong of the River*," in *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, by Su Xiaokang, Luxiang Wang, Richard W. Bodman, and Pin P. Wan. (Ithaca, N.Y.: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1991), 94.

<sup>204</sup> Zhang Peili (1987), quoted in Smith, *Nine Lives*, 396.

of Four during the Cultural Revolution. These educated classes were not “bourgeois intellectuals” and had by and large committed to a socialist agenda and could be considered both “red and expert.”<sup>205</sup> He went on to discuss specific methods of improving the nation’s educational programs, and highlighted nascent broadcasting technologies as a way of achieving “greater, faster, better, and more economical results.” The identification of a future that would make use of “new”, or at least previously underutilized, media was important for the Reform Era in general and for the education sector in particular. While Deng sought a rapprochement with the intellectual classes that would contribute to the “greater, faster, better” China, he did so with the hope that they could do so in a manner that would benefit the largest swath of population possible. This directive is something of a contrast to the protected environment at the elite art academies discussed in the previous chapter. At the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in particular, the Reform Era was not a time of frenzied progress toward a “greater, faster, better” society, but a time to slowly rebuild an educational institution while making room for cloistered experiments and extracurricular investigations.

The quote from historian Bao Zunxin (1937-2007), a top intellectual associated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, speaks to the actual development of the intellectual-academic sphere in the mid-1980s, almost a decade into the Reform Era. The Culture Fever that took hold among the intellectuals was not a direct contribution to the “more economical results” desired by Deng Xiaoping, but it did factor into the development of mass media in order to flesh out their discussions of culture, modernization, and the legacy of pre-Maoist Chinese culture in modern and contemporary China. As Bao presented it, the fundamental question being discussed by

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<sup>205</sup> Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 119.

intellectuals was whether “ancient culture” would be useful and perhaps integral in renegotiating modern China in the post-Mao period. This cultural fever played itself out in academic discussions and their print media extensions: book series and journals. In one case, this discussion was also extended to the realm of television broadcasting. This case, the 1988 miniseries *He Shang* (*River Elegy*, 河殇), presents an important experiment whereby the increasingly commercialized world of Chinese television was re-appropriated, not by the CCP apparatus but by the intellectual class and the academic discussions of the “philosophy of culture.” This television production presented harsh criticisms of both modern and Confucian elements of Chinese society. In a preface to the print edition of the series’ script, writer Su Xiaokang described this criticism as *fansi* (反思). *Fansi* roughly translates to “self-conscious reflection,” although the term itself originates as a Chinese translation of Hegel’s *nachdenken* – reflection after-the-fact that leads to the elevation of initial intuition to considered concepts. Su’s proposition for *He Shang* addresses the goal of elevated public discourse:

... [the series] should propose to bring information about all sorts of theories and thinking to the TV screen in large volume, endowing the film with a clear, rich and meaty awareness of the philosophy of culture, enabling it to offer people all sorts of ideas and to create the effect of a two-way dialogue with the audience and society, in the expectation that the broadcast of [*River Elegy*] will elicit broad-based concern and discussion.

This sort of design will make what used to be the most important elements in a television film – frame, music, language, etc. – retreat to a position of secondary importance, placing the element of thought in first place.... One could call this an instance of cooperation between television and the world of thought, an experiment in which the finest minds of contemporary China convey theory and information through the great medium of television.<sup>206</sup>

Su had thus positioned the mass medium of television as a means by which the *fansi* and admonitory criticism of elite intellectual circles could involve a wider swath of society to

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<sup>206</sup> Su, “Self Questioning,” 95-96.

the benefit of all. This directly correlates to the Confucian precept that education and self-cultivation are key components to the development of good government, and that the criticism and admonition at an individual and societal level are key components to the development of a harmonious society.

The third epigraph to this chapter comes from Zhang Peili and pertains to his mode of working in his years after graduating from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in 1984. This particular quote refers to his 1987 conceptual work *About X? Exhibition Procedures*, a text published in the periodical *Zhongguo Meishu (Fine Arts China)* the following year.<sup>207</sup> This text outlines step-by-step instructions for the execution of works of art, the artist's *X?* series, and their amalgamation into an exhibition. Another artwork from 1987, *Art Project No. 2*, consisted of similar text, in this case a nineteen-page mimeographed document containing "a stringent artistic system of rule and procedures."<sup>208</sup> Zhang was deeply interested in the conceptual foundations of artworks, and with experimenting in various degrees to which these conceptual art could be executed or not, inexactly reversing the traditional mode of "act, then report," to "report your intentions to act, then act, or not." Zhang continued his explanation of his conceptual works by stating, "...I do not think *Art Project No. 2* surpasses visual categories because it uses writings to empty a visual medium. On the contrary, I believe that because it enables a complete return of visual experience back to concept, it could be said that the depth of the visual image is even more real and richer [*sic*]."<sup>209</sup> This conceptual orientation is quite resonant with Bao Zunxin's assessment of Reform Era academic discussions about modernity and

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<sup>207</sup> Smith, *Nine Lives*, 396.

<sup>208</sup> Zhang Peili, "The point of departure for *Art Project No. 2 (Yishu jihua de er hao)* (1988/2008)", in Wu and Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 112.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

Su Xiaokang's enlargement of these *fansi* dialogues by exploring them in the popular medium of television.

Zhang Peili's adoption of video as an artistic medium is an extension of his own conceptual practices and the growing critical and admonitory role that intellectuals inhabited in the 1980s. Zhang's formation at the art academy during the tenure of Zheng Shengtian had paved the way for mediatic explorations. However, it is crucial to note Zhang's appropriation of video, and by extension, television, is a withdrawal from the public sphere and the popularization of intellectual debates. Su Xiaokang hoped to make academic dialogues on culture part of public discourse:

Some say that we must shatter Confucian ideas and undertake a "wholesale Westernization"; there are others who say that China's only way out is to adopt "Western learning for the essential principles, with Chinese learning for practical applications"; and yet others say that we must reconstruct a "third flowering of Confucian civilization." In recent years, no matter whether it is the Chinese intelligentsia reflecting [*fansi*] on the fate of Confucianism and discussing the question of a cultural strategy, or whether it is the grand ceremonies in honor of Confucius at Qufu, all of these demonstrate that self-questioning of the Chinese people has already touched on the very cutting issue of the choice of a national culture.<sup>210</sup>

Zhang Peili, on the other hand is much more ambiguous in his treatment of these public dialogues, and turned to video to experiment in the discrete realm of fine arts rather than to participate in the generalized public intellectual sphere.

### **Philosophical Overtones and The Pond Society**

Zhang Peili's eventual experimentation with and adoption of video art as his primary medium is part of a greater narrative about artistic and philosophical negotiations in China around 1985. The Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art played an important role in these, both because of the faculty and resources and the fact that the institution acted as a convener for like-minded students who were eagerly consuming

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<sup>210</sup> Su, "Self Questioning," 98.



newly-available translations of Western literature and philosophy as well as formerly forbidden classics of Chinese art. Zhang has spoken about the environment at the academy and in provincial Hangzhou as distinct from the more politically charged art world of Beijing in the mid-1980s, stating that "...we didn't see ourselves as heroes of the world. We were interested in many different things – not just art."<sup>211</sup> It was through the academy that these students and recent graduates were able to coalesce into informal artists' organizations and organize group exhibitions, a hallmark of the experimental avant-garde in many contexts. It is my belief that the plurality of topics explored by these groups is what made the adoption of new art media both interesting and necessary to Zhang Peili, and that the quasi-official infrastructure that linked these groups to the academy and the official Chinese Artists Association made him want to set his practice apart from more mainstream modern art conversations. Although he professes an innocent, wide-reaching curiosity that led to his eventual experimentation with video as an art medium, I contend that his turn toward new media was an admonitory move that conveyed his critique of the Chinese art world as well as the restrictions placed on cultural practices throughout the People's Republic.

Zhang and his colleagues Bao Jianfei, Zha Li, Geng Jianyi, and Song Ling in Hangzhou founded the Youth Creation Society (*Qingnian Chuangzao She*, 青年创造社) in 1984, in essence a steering committee to organize a group exhibition of contemporary artwork by young artists including students from ZAFSA. Working with the local branch

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<sup>211</sup> Zhang Peili, in discussion with the author at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, 22 July 2008. This sense of distance from the overtly political and economic discussions that pervaded the academic discourse in Beijing was not limited to Hangzhou. It was also expressed by artists at other provincial art academies, including the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art which was the subject of the recent Asia Art Archive documentary *From Jean-Paul Sartre to Teresa Teng* (2010), a film that speaks to the "reading fever" and broad discussions of literature, poetry, and philosophy that contributed to the exploratory atmosphere in and around the academy in the mid-1980s.

of the Chinese Artists' Association, the committee came up with a curatorial plan for an exhibition of works in which "modernity prevailed"<sup>212</sup> entitled '85 *New Space*, which was to open in December of 1985. The works featured in the exhibition were all within the realm of traditional fine arts, executed in media taught in the art academies: Chinese ink painting, oil painting, prints, sculpture. These artworks were not thematically cohesive, but many were composed with a limited, "cool" palate, and much of the subject matter related to the alienation and detachment of modern urban life. As put by Bao Jianfei in an explanation of the exhibition's works in the national journal of the Chinese Artists' Association, *Meishu*:

We make strenuous efforts through constant exploration and self-denial to understand ourselves, our lives, and the lives of our audience...in order to discover the meaning of art; content reflecting everyday and ordinary life and through our simplified images and colors, as well as our heightened quietude, we express the strength of our souls so audiences not only observe the surface of our work but pay even greater attention to the space in the work which needs to be filled with the idea of freedom.<sup>213</sup>

While these statements are not attributed to Zhang Peili personally, Bao Jianfei was speaking for the Youth Creation Society about the art scene in Hangzhou. Specifically, he referred to the individual, contemplative, soul-searching nature of these works and their conceptual character. Shortly thereafter, Zhang and his compatriots Geng, Bao, and Song, along with the sculptor Wang Qiang, in Hangzhou disbanded the Youth Creation Society and formed the Pond Society (*Chi She*, 池社), an artistic collective specifically committed to exploring these existential themes with non-academic media such as performance, installation, and video.

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<sup>212</sup> Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 861

<sup>213</sup> *Fine Arts (Meishu)*, 2 (1986):48, cited in Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 862.

Like many of the art collectives in the mid-1980s, the Pond Society was well-documented and provided some of its own ekphrastic apparatus:

The use of the name “pond” was designed to stress the notion of “saturation” as applied to two aspects of the perception of “truth”, namely the themes of an artist’s work and the effect of art on audiences. We also wanted the word “pond” to express how the linguistic meaning of art itself was unknowable. The Pond Society no longer attempted to grasp technique, because we all took the view that the “sacred” easel was not the only way of relaying the ideas we wanted to convey. We were making every effort to break the confines of language and to advocate a fuzzy form which was a psychologically charged “artistic activity”. In this, painting, performance, video, and the environment (such forms all being conceptual) could provide the characteristics of visual language and establish an organic and connected whole.<sup>214</sup>

This piece on the formation and goals of the Pond Society appeared in early 1987 in *Art Trends* an influential periodical published by the Artists’ Association of Hubei Province.<sup>215</sup>

Made up of contributions from young art critics concerned with philosophical renewal and innovation in the arts, this magazine was dedicated to “reporting...news from the front line of contemporary art theory.”<sup>216</sup> The inclusion of the Pond Society’s artistic statement in this theory-driven milieu locates them within a larger academic discussion that took place in the mid- to late-1980s. *Art Trends* advocated for a discussion with philosophical overtones (*zhexue yivwei*, 哲学意味) and it is important to note that the artists of the Pond Society were very much in line with that branch of art-oriented theory. This quadrant of the art world fostered a theoretical rather than connoisseurial environment to discuss contemporary art from China and abroad with respect to a universalized notion

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<sup>214</sup> Pond Society (Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Song Ling), on its founding in 1986, in *Art Trends (Meishu Sichao)*, 1 (1987): 18.

<sup>215</sup> The publication *Meishu Sichao*, 美术思潮 is sometimes called *The Trend of Art Thought* in English-language materials.

<sup>216</sup> Köppel-Yang, “Art Magazines and Symposia,” 48.

of “scientific” and “non-ideological”<sup>217</sup> debate rather than a specifically Chinese or Reform Era Context.

In the context of the Pond Society collaborations, Zhang Peili explored installation and performance from 1986-1987. These works all maintained a figurative element. *Work #1: Yang's Tai Chi Series* (1986) and *Work #2: Travelers in green space* (1986) both used larger-than-life-sized two-dimensional human figures cut out of paper or paper-board, installing them on a long, high brick wall (*Work #1*) and suspended between trees and shrubbery in the nearby forest (*Work #2*).<sup>218</sup> Both of these works included performative elements. *Work #1* was a processual performance initially viewed only by the artists themselves as they created the large paper figures striking the twelve fundamental positions of Yang-style tai chi over the course of two days. Once the figures were installed on the wall, the passersby became participants in the installation simply by nature of them seeing the artistic intervention in a public space. Zhang Peili declared, “It was not a novel gaming activity, nor a well-designed experimental art project; it was an honest and natural dialogue between the artists and the people walking on the street.”<sup>219</sup> *Work #2*, in which similar paper figures in tai chi poses were installed in a wooded area near West Lake, involved a different type of audience participation, where the performance was the act of the artists inviting and transporting viewers from their normal urban environment to the nearby forest.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Work #1*... was a collaboration between Geng Jianyi, Song Ling, Zhang Peili, and Wang Qiang. *Work #2*... was a collaboration between Zhang Peili, Song Ling, Bao Jianfei, and Geng Jianyi.

<sup>219</sup> Zhang Peili, “*Chishe Jianbao dierhao* (Pronouncement of the Pond Society No. 2),” June 10, 1986, in Gao Minglu, *'85 mei shu yun dong (The '85 movement)* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Publishing Co., 2008), 198-199; Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity*, 241.

<sup>220</sup> Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 869.

Like his proclamation that the artistic investigations in Hangzhou in the 1980s were simply personal interests, Zhang's dismissal of these projects as essentially unplanned and without agenda belies the underlying connections that bind the works to traditional cultural, artistic and scholarly lineages. The removal of these installations from the context of fine arts exhibitions was an important element of these transmediatic explorations, a step away from the official realms of education and display. This was also Zhang's first visual gesture toward a generalized traditional Chinese art form. His recent oil paintings while at the academy all featured recognizably modern Chinese figures: swimmers at an indoor swimming pool; musicians and their Western brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments. In *Work #1* and *Work #2*, the symbolism of the tai chi practitioner is thus multivalent: for all the Pond Society artists it is a step away from the types of human subjects they had previously depicted; it is also a nod toward the traditional arts of China and a type of "connected whole" that included literary and physical practices, perhaps more so than visual art; and placement of the tai chi figures progressively further away from the modern institutions of education and public exhibition, first on the street, then in the forest, evokes the trope of the scholar-turned-hermit, a powerful symbol of considered protest in Chinese culture.

This last point, the consideration of the artistic subject as a continuation of the trope of the hermit, is a nuanced reference that requires careful consideration. The robust education in art technique and in modern art history at ZAFa was supplemented in no small part by traditional Chinese art history. Even the moniker Pond Society takes on a specifically Chinese meaning when considered in this light, elucidating the artists' slightly opaque explanations of the term "pond" and its connotations of saturation by calling to mind the scholar-recluse's retreat into nature, typified by the Zhejiang-based

Yuan dynasty painter Wu Zhen (1280-1354) in his *Hermit Fisherman on Lake Dongting* (1351, National Palace Museum, Taipei) depicting or at least referring to the incorruptible first century scholar-hermit Yan Ziling.<sup>221</sup> This character-type was found throughout Chinese history, but there was plenty of room within the identity of the hermit to remain a part of the everyday world, as the members of the Pond Society did with their experimentations just outside the art world that they still sometimes inhabited. These degrees of eremitic protest were well-defined by the Tang poet Bo Juyi (772-846):

The great hermit is at court  
The small hermit is inside a hillside plot.  
A hillside plot is too solitary a place,  
And court and city are too turbulent.  
Best of all is the middle hermit,  
-- a hermit in the nominal post of a secretary.<sup>222</sup>

While the Pond Society artists have not spoken about these references in particular, they are so generally known that it would be exceedingly likely that any artists who had graduated from an elite art academy would be familiar with them as historic precedents. It is also important to note that amid the general Culture Fever and Reading Fever of the 1980s that sparked the reinvigoration of the arts and sciences, there was also a strong current of neo-Confucianism and neo-traditionalism.<sup>223</sup> This chaotic mixture of widely

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<sup>221</sup> Hay, John. *Boundaries in China*. London: Reaktion Books, 1994, pp.129-130.

<sup>222</sup> Bo Juyi, in Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 46.

<sup>223</sup> Confucianism writ large became extremely important in the immediate years following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, resulting in numerous academic conferences and the creation of Confucian studies institutes. The resurgence of interest in Confucianism in the intellectual sphere in the Reform Era was largely predicated upon examining the importance of a society based on rationality, stability, and order that Confucianism held in common with the Western Enlightenment tradition as well as Marxism. Confucianism was present in 1980s intellectual discourse in several manifestations. The New Confucianism of the 1920s, inherited by Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) in the 1980s, stressed moral spirituality and the Chinese incorporation of Buddhist and Daoist religiosity to bridge gaps in Kantian transcendental aesthetics. Li Zehou, one of the Reform Era's leading philosophers and leading authorities on Chinese intellectual history disavowed any affiliation with Mou's brand of New Confucianism. Instead Li incorporated Confucius (or, the Confucian socio-cultural legacy), Kant, and Marxist historical materialism. (Lin, Galikowski, *The Search for Modernity*, 91; Wing-cheuk Chan, "On Mao Zongsan's Idealist

divergent theories collapsed across social, cultural and historical divisions allowed for artists to cherry-pick and collage their influences. Especially with regard to Chinese art history, modern artists in the 1980s were able to integrate generalized conceptual elements into their work in unproblematized gestures, much like the intellectuals at large who were actively looking to mix a few elements of pre-Maoist culture into their discussions.

One more cultural reference to tai chi that the Pond Society would have been aware of begs mentioning – the general cultural interest in the traditional martial art of *qigong* (气功), “cultivation of vital energy,” that developed throughout the Reform Era and had reached “fever” status by the mid-1980s. Although slightly different from each other in form and application, both *taijiquan* (太极拳), which roughly translates to “supreme ultimate fist,” and *qigong* are “inner” martial arts and operate on the principle of harnessing and directing the body’s *qi* or vital energy through movement, breath control, and meditation. This practice is rooted in longstanding martial arts like those studied at the Wu Tang monastery in Hunan province, but it only began to be codified as a distinct practice in the seventeenth century within the context of the closed ranks of the Chen family in Henan province. Their lineage of martial arts was related to military techniques like those published by the Ming dynasty general Qi Jiguang in the *New Treatise on Disciplined Service* (*Jixiao Xinshu*, 纪效新书) in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>224</sup>

These boxing moves were blended with with *qigong* breathing techniques for a practice

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Confucianism,” in *Confucian Ethics in Retrospect and Prospect*, eds. Qingsong Shen and Kwong-loi Shun, (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008) 171; Süng-hwan Yi, *A Topography of Confucian Discourse: Politico-Philosophical Reflections on Confucian Discourse Since Modernity* (Paramus, N.J.: Homa & Sekey Books, 2006), 52; Sylvia Chan, “Li Zehou and New Confucianism,” in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 105).

<sup>224</sup> Qi Jiguang, *Ji xiao xin shu* (c.1562) (Taipei: Guang wen shu ju, 1976).

focused on health benefits rather than combat techniques. This practice only became known to the wider public after the first student from outside the Chen family, Yang Luchan (1799-1872), began to teach it to a general population in his native Hebei province, modifying the system to eliminate strenuous and athletic moves.<sup>225</sup> One of Yang's students was from an elite scholar-gentry family that was able to introduce Yang to upper-level officials and Qing Imperial Guards in Beijing, where he then relocated in order to spread his teachings which segued well with the general cultural interest in modernized adaptations of Chinese traditional practices as part of the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895). Yang's sons and grandsons continued instruction in taijiquan, further modifying the forms and techniques to make the practice even more accessible to practitioners of all fitness levels, especially the elderly. These teachings were further spread in the 1930s when Yang Luchan's grandson Yang Chengfu (1883-1936) published training manuals and other educational materials. This was roughly contemporaneous with the Chen family's debut teaching taijiquan to a general audience in Beijing in 1928, and the publication of the *Chen Family Taijiquan Illustrated* in 1933 and subsequent publication of additional expanded volumes beginning in 1935.<sup>226</sup> Chen-style and the more widely known Yang-style taijiquan in nineteenth and early twentieth century China was extremely important in the conveyance of ostensibly "traditional" Chinese cultural practices. That these practices were actually fairly recent developments, hybridized and modernized to make them palatable to the masses instead of the martial arts elite, was rarely mentioned.

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<sup>225</sup> Barbara Davis and Weiming Chen, *Taijiquan Classics: An Annotated Translation* (Berkeley, Calif: North Atlantic Books, 2004), 11.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 11.



In the Reform Era, the physical practices of taijiquan and qigong were taken up by groups all over China as a collective activity, in no small part because of the ostensible link that these practices provided to “traditional” Chinese martial arts.<sup>227</sup> That the conveyed “tradition” might be a false one did not go unnoticed, nor did claims of health and longevity that were proclaimed in absence of scientific proof. As Jing Wang has noted in her book *High Culture Fever*, the re-discovery of qigong during the reform era was often lamented by intellectuals as a sign that an illegitimate pseudo-science could easily invade the realm of academic and cultural discussions.

As one disillusioned intellectual put it, this was not a period in which heroes were given birth. This was, on the contrary, an era in which “our nation is seeking inspiration from the symbols of ancient civilization, i.e., the Great Wall and the dragon. Individuals, on the other hand are searching for formulas of longevity from qigong.”<sup>228</sup>

The controversial but popular nature of taijiquan and qigong practices would have been very apparent to the Pond Society, and the inclusion of the figures in *Work #1* and *Work #2* should be taken as an understanding of their self-conscious place as cultural observers and critics. Their own lineage as Chinese artists who might assume the status of great, small, or middle hermits in order to best comment on society and its power structures was thus combined with their position as modern artists and intellectuals that learned from and poked fun at mass culture and its imprecisions.

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<sup>227</sup> Anthropologist Thomas Ots has written extensively about the implications that the neo-Daoist practices of tai chi and qigong became extremely popular during the Reform Era because of the “collective catharsis” achieved by the reclamation of this health practice that had been branded as superstition during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>228</sup> Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 38.

### **30x30**

Zhang Peili's membership in both the Youth Creation Society and the Pond Society is important when considering the admonitory gesture of his first work of video art, *30x30* (1988), and in his pursuit of video as an artistic medium in the late 1980s. The well-known piece, taped as one long static shot, shows an industrial-tiled floor and the crossed legs and white-gloved hands of an anonymous person, actually Zhang himself, who drops and shatters a glass mirror, glues it back together, drops it again, and reassembles it once more for the entire duration of the 180 minute videocassette. This piece was developed to be shown at the second Huangshan Conference, held in 1988, itself a planning meeting for the proposed 1989 exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* to be held at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. Many artists from avant-garde enclaves all over China presented their recent works, and Zhang screened the video with the condition that the piece, unedited and without titles of any sort, be considered for concept rather than technical skill.<sup>229</sup> His appeal to ignore the technical deficits of this experimental work is interesting for many reasons given the context of the screening. As with his statements that *Work #1* was not "...a well-designed experimental art project,"<sup>230</sup> this self-deprecation for the rough and unfinished nature of experimental forays into non-academic media speaks both to his own pride as a talented academy-trained oil painter and his criticism of this very skill. Bristling at the academic emphasis on technical prowess endorsed by the beaux-arts and Soviet curricular methods that resulted in his own facility, he asserts incompetence while positioning himself as a concept-generator. Despite his interest in experimenting outside of his *métier*, he remained self-conscious of

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<sup>229</sup> Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 874.

<sup>230</sup> Zhang Peili, "Chishe Jianbao di'erhao (Pronouncement of the Pond Society No. 2)," June 10, 1986, in Gao, *The '85 movement*, 198-199; and Gao, *Total Modernity*, 241.

presenting such unrefined work, especially in the context of the Huangshan Conference, where other artists trained as oil painters would be displaying their work in that medium. Also, by demurring as to the technical quality of the work, Zhang was able to craft the screening to become less about the work itself and more about the personal experience of each viewer. In a 1989 letter to the art historian Lü Peng, Zhang emphasized the internalized participation required of each audience member:

I believe that people watching this video for 180 minutes will also experience exhaustion and bored agitation. This is the most direct experience and is real. Since we can calmly accept all the events we encounter in life, we have no reason to reject feelings created by our visual experience.<sup>231</sup>

His emphasis on the psychological and physical experience of the viewers allows him to claim the work as a naïve experimentation, pushing the agency towards the audience. This stands in stark contrast to the overt editorial messages of the programs broadcast on China Central Television (CCTV), a topic that will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

Zhang's emphasis on the individual psychological and physical responses to watching his tedious work and his deadpan presentation effectively allowed him to sidestep the rich formal and symbolic implications of *30x30*, which need to be addressed prior to discussions of the specific significance of video in art history and in China. Mirrors carry specific meaning in Chinese culture and art, as some of the finest art objects from the Bronze age and as objects thought to be imbued with protective and magical qualities. The mirror – shattered, reassembled, and then re-shattered and re-assembled could serve as an easy metaphor for the state of Chinese society or government – which had undergone radical disruption and re-building, a story that

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<sup>231</sup> Zhang Peili, letter to Lü Peng, 1989, quoted in Lü, *A history of art in 20th-Century China*, 874.

repeats itself and is applicable to almost any historical time: the Reform Era, the People's Republic Era, the twentieth century, the modern era initiated by the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century, or the entire dynastic history of China, human civilization, etc. The form of a perfect square is also loaded with symbolic meaning in Zhang's world – the urban square was an important element of Maoist city planning, and functioned as a part of imperial city planning and cosmology. The piece's filmic references are also plentiful, invoking Alain Resnais' New Wave film *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* (1961) and its painfully long shot that shows a waiter's hands slowly picking up the shards of a broken glass one by one, and the silent surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, in which the disembodied hands of Buñuel hold a woman's eye open prior to slicing it with a razor in the opening scene. The mirror's significance in Western art history, both as a tool for rendering perspectival accuracy and as a visual convention represented within the composition, is equally important when considering this first video created by an oil painter.

For our purposes, the most significant implications of Zhang's use of a mirror in his first video work is the traditional reading of literati scholar-artist's work as a mirror for the society at large in general and rulers in particular. These narrative paintings and illustrations were understood as societal critique and comment, and were frequently metaphorically referred to as reflections or mirrors. The literal use of the specific word "mirror" also appears often with regards to moralistic art, as in the *Emperor's Mirror*, *Discussed and Illustrated* a late Ming compendium of didactic anecdotes of historic and legendary emperors, and in the Song dynasty art critic Guo Ruoxu's eleventh century

work *Overview of Painting* in which he refers to the use of paintings as “advisory mirrors” by emperors and Confucian officials.<sup>232</sup>

This last point, that the entire oeuvre of an educated Confucian scholar-artist was intended to hold a mirror up to China’s leaders and induce considered, critical self-reflection is quite significant for our reading of Zhang Peili’s initial foray into video art. His audience was composed of elite modern artists at the cutting edge of a cultural and artistic avant-garde who were themselves forming a sort of institutional framework. They rejected official styles and artistic practices, yet were almost all the products of official art education institutions. They clamored to be exhibited and written about in existing venues, while forming new circuits for the reception of their work. They participated in quasi-mainstream events and forums, and created works that included typically “Chinese” visual elements without necessarily reflecting the quotidian experiences that Zhang and his Pond Society colleagues so highly valued.

Thus, the physical discomfort that Zhang inflicted with his monotonous three-hour video project was in part an admonition –artists should be made uncomfortable for not holding up the mirror to themselves and their society in an authentic way. As the inaugural work of video art in China, *30x30* carried with it a radicality and a call-to-arms that Zhang nonetheless disavowed. The piece, he said, was merely a reflection of his personal interest in mediatic experimentation and a natural interest in a contemporary art medium that had already been explored extensively in the West and Japan.<sup>233</sup> *30x30* was an invitation for himself and his fellow artists to investigate the possibilities of non-

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<sup>232</sup> For more on these specific examples and on the implicit Confucian morality embedded in traditional Chinese literati art, see the work of the art historian Julia K. Murray, including: Julia K. Murray, “From Textbook to Testimonial: The Emperor’s Mirror, an Illustrated Discussion (Di Jian Tu Shuo/Teikan Zusetsu) in China and Japan,” *Ars Orientalis* 31 (2001): 65-101; and Julia K. Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 75 & 84.

<sup>233</sup> Gao, *Total Modernity*, 241.

academic media to critically examine their own modern practices, and a reminder that the role of the hermit-critic need not be fully inscribed within nor fully dismissive of the norms and institutions of society. This step beyond the non-academic realms of installation and performance was both about the specific possibilities of video, and the consideration of what any conceptually “new” medium could offer an artist.

The title *30x30* also merits discussion before proceeding to an exploration of television and broadcasting in China. Although ostensibly a simple measurement of the piece of mirrored glass that is broken and reassembled in Zhang’s video, the number thirty (*sanshi*) also relates to a Chinese proverb that had specific significance in the Reform Era. This proverb, “*sanshi nian hedong, sanshi nian hexi*,” literally translates to “thirty years east of the river, thirty years west of the river.” The implication is that prosperity, political trends, or intellectual currents have life cycles and shift back and forth over generations, and the differing and opposing populations will each have their day. The specific span of thirty years was quite significant during the Reform Era. The Mao era had lasted approximately thirty years, from the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 to Deng Xiaoping’s ascension in 1978, and speculations about China’s future often used that round number to contemplate the nation’s future. The other implication of choosing a title that had resonance with the *hedong...hexi* proverb is the image of *he*, the river. As will be explored in the latter part of this chapter, the seminal television series *He Shang* (*River Elegy*) was an unavoidable cultural touchstone and an important point of comparison for any critical video work. In addition, the intellectual activities of the 1930s in China were relevant to Reform Era discussions of Chinese modernity, as has been explored in previous chapters of this dissertation, and the legacy of the generation of the 1930s was well known in at the art academy.

## TV Broadcasting and Video Art in China

Upon publicly sharing his first foray into video art, presented as a real-time recording of New York traffic resulting from the Pope's 1965 visit (though this story may be apocryphal), Nam June Paik declared that, "Television has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back."<sup>234</sup> This statement embodies much of the violently anti-establishment mentality that propelled artists to experiment in video, both with respect to the art world and the media landscape of the mid-twentieth century. Compare this dialog with dominant broadcast media in the West to the circumstances surrounding the adoption of video as a fine art medium in China in the 1980s. Television sets were far from ubiquitous in China, with less than half of Chinese households owning a television set in 1988, the year Zhang Peili created *30x30*.<sup>235</sup> For those who had access to television, broadcasting was fairly limited. The turn toward video was not a challenge to the visual vocabulary of television, but a simultaneous exploration of the medium's creative potential. Zhang Peili's evolution from an oil painting student to a video artist was a result of his own curiosity about the new and arcane technology of video, as well as his considered criticism of the government's use and editing of mass media in general in an era of sharply contradicting policies of political control and economic liberalization.

Consider the history of television and the state of broadcasting in the 1980s in China as a backdrop to the exploration of video as a new fine art medium. Mass media under Mao was uniformly steeped in ideology; programming merely supported Mao's successive mass mobilization campaigns. Experiments in broadcasting technology in

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<sup>234</sup> Quoted in Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2011), 21-22.

<sup>235</sup> Kevin Latham, *Pop Culture China: Media, Arts, and Lifestyle* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 47.

1956 at the Central Broadcasting Science Research Facility and the Beijing Broadcasting Equipment Factory utilized Soviet technology and the aid of engineers from the Soviet Union.<sup>236</sup> China's first television station was launched in Beijing in 1958, the same year that the country's priorities for the medium of television were succinctly articulated in reports to the CCP's Central Committee and the State Council. These guidelines ranked the goals of this new type of visual broadcasting as follows:

- 1) To propagate the policy of the Party and the State
- 2) To report the achievement of the socialist cause
- 3) To proliferate technological and social education
- 4) To enrich the cultural life of people
- 5) To promote international exchange <sup>237</sup>

This reflects the Party's consideration of the medium as a communications tool and not as a creative industry. Unlike the inherently commercial overtones of television broadcasting from the West, Chinese television was strictly government-financed and did not allow commercial advertising until the early Reform Era.<sup>238</sup> The governmental apparatus that controlled broadcasting was complex, and television falls both under the supervision of the Radio and Television Bureau and the CCP's Propaganda Department which is itself under the Political Bureau of the Central Committee. This structure meant that the television programming was an outlet for Official dictates, communications, and culture. As a point of comparison, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the U.S. was mainly charged with establishing uniform technical standards at the onset of commercial broadcasting when it was established in 1934, and with maintaining a "public interest standard" with respect to the growing number of competing commercial entities

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>237</sup> David Ward, *Television and Public Policy: Change and Continuity in an Era of Global Liberalization* (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008), 91.

<sup>238</sup> Junhao Hong, "China," in *Encyclopedia of Television*, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 511.



in the 1960s.<sup>239</sup> The FCC was created with a no-censorship provision, although legislation in the mid-1970s established the commission's authority to restrict indecent and obscene material.<sup>240</sup>

After the establishment of Beijing Television (BTV) in 1958, a station was established in Shanghai that same year; by 1961 twenty-six other provincial television stations had been established. This network remained partial and unconnected throughout the Mao era, and it wasn't until July 1976, a few month's before Mao's death, that there was an attempt at producing a national news broadcast. It was only in 1978, the year Deng Xiaoping assumed chairmanship of the People's Political Consultative conference, that this news broadcast, *Xinwen Lianbo* (新闻联播)<sup>241</sup>, really became influential.<sup>242</sup> In many respects, television broadcasting in the Reform Era was a completely new medium. Television sets had only become commonplace in Chinese homes in the early to mid-1980s, coinciding with an exponential growth in television stations which increased from 52 in 1983 to 202 in 1985.<sup>243</sup> Ideological control over programming content was loosened significantly, and self-consciously apolitical entertainment programming was given more airtime than ever before.<sup>244</sup> Imported television programs were strictly limited to those that conformed to state-approved

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<sup>239</sup> Hugh Richard Slotten, *Radio and Television Regulation: Broadcast Technology in the United States, 1920-1960* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 68-70; Kimberly Zarkin and Michael J. Zarkin, *The Federal Communications Commission: Front Line in the Culture and Regulation Wars* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>240</sup> Stanley D. Tickton, "Obscene/Indecent Programming: The FCC and WBAI," in *Censorship, Secrecy, Access, and Obscenity*, ed. Theodore R. Kupferman (Westport, Conn: Meckler, 1990), 59.

<sup>241</sup> *Xinwen Lianbo* is still the premier national news broadcast in China, a thirty minute program broadcast daily on almost all stations at 7:00pm, uninterrupted by commercials.

<sup>242</sup> James Francis Scotton and William A. Hachten, *New Media for a New China* (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 86.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> By the mid-1980s, entertainment programming doubled, taking up 55% of airtime.

Lent, (1986) quoted in Junhao Hong, *The Internationalization of Television in China: The Evolution of Ideology, Society, and Media Since the Reform* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 100.

themes in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but by the mid-1980s the thematic nature and variety of programming expanded significantly.

Liberalization and diversification in the telecommunications sphere waxed and waned in the Reform Era. For example, in 1983 when the Party's nation-wide Anti Spiritual Pollution Campaign called for a sharp decrease in imported television content like the American show *The Man From Atlantis* and soap operas from Mexico, Brazil, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.<sup>245</sup> The censorship system was generally loosened throughout the rest of the 1980s, and content increasingly tended toward pure entertainment.<sup>246</sup> Another exception came in 1986 with the Anti Bourgeois Liberalization Campaign that specifically attacked Western influence and thus curtailed the amount of imported Western television programming. However, the Chinese Communist Party adopted its 7<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan in 1986, a plan that recognized the role of mass media in both informing and entertaining the nation.<sup>247</sup> This policy reflects an internal struggle within the Party's leadership between factions that argued for strict limitations on television programming content in order to better preserve Chinese culture and values, and those who advocated for increased exposure to Western culture and television programming in order to show Chinese citizens the value of social progression, innovation, and technological advancement.

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<sup>245</sup> Hong, *Internationalization of Television in China*, 102; Min Wang and Arvind Singhal, "Ke Wang,' a Chinese Television Soap Opera with a Message," *Gazette: International Journal of the Science of the Press* 49, no. 3 (1992): 181.

<sup>246</sup> Hong, *The Internationalization of Television in China*, 100.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

## **River Elegy and the Media Landscape of the late 1980s**

The premier screening of Zhang Peili's first video work *30x30* occurred in November 1988 at the second Huangshan Conference, a gathering of art critics and theorists organized by Gao Minglu. The Huangshan Conference occurred prior to any screening of examples of Western video art.<sup>248</sup> It is extremely important, however, to note that *30x30* was realized in the same year as the watershed documentary miniseries *He Shang*. This six-part television event broadcast on CCTV in June of 1988 presented a critical analysis of Chinese culture and tradition, using the Yellow River and the dragon as symbols of China's enduring backwardness and calling for the nation's modernization and Westernization. It became a point of discussion and generated controversy for its polemical narrative, and the ensuing debates among China's intellectuals were widespread among many disciplines as well as within the upper ranks of the CCP. The *He Shang* controversy was centered around the series' central argument that China needed to modernize and Westernize to avoid further stagnation that had held the nation and culture back for thousands of years.

For the purposes of this dissertation, *He Shang* is important as an indicator of the evolution of television as a medium involved in cultural and political discourse in China as well as an example of cultural criticism in the intellectual and public spheres. As the

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<sup>248</sup> The screening of Western video art in China took place in 1990. Ernst Mitzka, a visiting scholar from Germany, had brought with him video art pieces that he had produced as part of a celebration of the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the city of Bonn. These pieces were originally broadcast on Germany's first non-public TV channel RTL (Radio Television Luxembourg). The screening of these pieces was a major event at the academy, with over 500 students, professors, and recent in attendance. Mitzka had been invited to ZAFa for a one month visiting professorship by Shu Chuanxi, a faculty member in the Chinese painting department who had studied in Germany in the late 1950s. In a 2012 recollection of the screening of the videos he had brought with him, Mitzka states that, "People from the Chinese TV were at the screenings and invited us to one of their meetings to see more of the videomaterial [*sic*], but after judging some of the stuff as obscene(it was the two dots and the triangle of Friederike Petzold), we were quickly dis invited [*sic*]." (Ernst Mitzka, "Visit in china," email message to the author, 23 April 2012.)

former, *He Shang* was an exceptional example of the navigation of multi-tiered censorship measures that prevented the publication or production of materials deemed ideologically problematic or harmful to government objectives. While *He Shang* and television programming in general was not exempted from governmental review and censorship, it is important to understand that television production was less regulated than print media, the mass medium that received the most scrutiny throughout the history of the People's Republic.

The official system of review developed soon after the establishment of the People's Republic, and was further solidified during the Cultural Revolution. In the realm of print works, previously independent publishing houses were nationalized starting around 1951 when they were first converted into joint private-public ventures before their full transition to public concerns by 1954.<sup>249</sup> All works were subject to evaluation by an editor, editorial supervisor, and chief editor, all of whom would have been Party members committed to cultivating a long career of official advancement with little incentive to err on the side of allowing the publication of materials that might be deemed questionable. This process was especially effective because the editors were not censors by trade, but intellectual professionals who were capable of assessing works based on style, content, tone, and oblique references.<sup>250</sup> During the 1980s, despite the official encouragement to “reform and open up,” intellectuals who were interested in pluralizing cultural and intellectual discourse through journals and cultural events came up against these processes of official review that were still firmly in place.

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<sup>249</sup> Fangzheng Chen and Guantao Jin, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy: The Chinese Popular Cultural Movement and Political Transformation 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997), 98.

<sup>250</sup> Chen and Jin, *Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy*, 99.

The non-governmental sphere in the 1980s was thus to be negotiated by carving out *minjian* or “folk” publications, events, and media by working within the official parameters but circumventing the thorough editorial process. Some such periodicals such as the 1980 series *Youthful Manuscripts* (*Qingnian Wengao*, 青年文稿) were presented as collected essays in order to circumvent the strict supervision that accompanied the publication of new journals, but such efforts were usually somewhat short-lived. *Youthful Manuscripts* itself was quickly shut down after it was brought to the attention of the bureau of Publication Administration.<sup>251</sup> The contradictions embedded in this process of liberalized print media and the entrenched system of review were the result of the high-level disagreements within the CCP. Intellectuals were inspired by the liberal leader Hu Yaobang, General Secretary of the Party, who advocated for the role of China’s intellectual elites in the nation’s economic and social development. He promoted the rehabilitation of intellectuals who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution. He also developed educational policy and media campaigns that promoted intellectual inquiry and frowned on dogmatic adherence to Maoist dictates.<sup>252</sup> Hu’s resignation, forced in 1987 by a leftist Party faction, signaled a brief reactionary turn by Deng Xiaoping and was something of a shock to the intellectuals who had been committed to liberalizing and pluralizing the public sphere. This setback, however, was not enough to counteract the momentum that had built up throughout the 1980s, and intellectuals continued to push for a diversified and less regulated media environment as part of the

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<sup>251</sup> Chen and Jin, *Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy*, 105; William C. Godby, “Televisual Discourse and the Mediation of Power: Living Room Dialogues with Modernity in Reform-Era China,” in *Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities*, eds. Randy Kluver and John H. Powers (Stamford, Conn: Ablex Pub. Corp, 1999), 130-133.

<sup>252</sup> Carol Lee Hamrin, “Conclusion: New Trends under Deng Xiaoping and his Successors,” in *China’s Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship*, eds. Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek, and Carol Lee Hamrin (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1987), 286.

modernization and “New Enlightenment”. For example, less than a year after Hu’s resignation, Gan Yang and other elite students of Western philosophy, all intellectual proponents of modernization by the introduction of Western thought, created *Culture: China and the World*, another series of collected essays.<sup>253</sup> This series survived long enough to publish five issues, from December 1987 through 1988, including many translations of important Western philosophical works as well as the editorial staff’s own articles on the need for China to reform and modernize.

This background of attempted circumvention of the Party’s review mechanisms by intellectuals and the periodic quashing of these efforts by the robust censorship and review processes makes it all the more remarkable that *He Shang* was produced and aired with such little interference or censorship. The origination of the documentary project *He Shang* relates to the *minjian* cultural space that evolved throughout the 1980s, disguising criticism of the center with a “rural” rumination, a mode reminiscent of the couched admonition of the “middle hermit.” CCTV had produced and aired several short documentary *minjian* topics, more or less human-interest stories, as part of its news broadcasts starting in 1985. CCTV even approached the editorial staff of *Towards the Future*, the important book series which had a similar editorial program to *Culture: China and the World*, to develop cultural television programming on topics that it had explored in its printed volumes. Not much came of these discussions until the end of 1986, when a feature on *Towards the Future* was produced, then abandoned when the views of the series’

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<sup>253</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 96.

co-editor Jin Guantao were deemed too controversial to be given national exposure through CCTV.<sup>254</sup>

All this is to say that television, along with other Chinese mass media in the 1980s, was neither fully in the hands of the “enlightened” intellectuals pushing for cultural and academic liberalization nor entirely under the control of Party cadres committed exclusively to pro-governmental propaganda. The fact that *River Elegy*, a program with a critical and leftist editorial message, was part of the media landscape of 1988 is an important factor in understanding Zhang Peili’s experimentation with video that same year. He did not seek to “attack” television the way that Nam June Paik did in 1965, as television was not the dominant public communications medium. Instead, he saw the potential of video to help reinvigorate avant-garde art experimentation the way that the medium of television was slowly altering the cultural landscape of everyday people. It is the confluence of the creation of a non-governmental public sphere by elite intellectuals and the liminal space occupied by cultural televisual enterprises within the state-run broadcast media that created the conditions for artistic experimentation with video, and in particular Zhang Peili’s experimentation in with long-duration, deadpan, absurdist piece. It was the novelty and potential of the medium that created a modern space for Zhang to inhabit as a critic, observer, and producer of cultural discourse.

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<sup>254</sup> Chen and Jin, *Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy*, 216.

## Chapter 5

### Performance Art and the Enactment of Admonition

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This final case study explores experimentation with performance art by the artist Zhang Huan in the early 1990s after his graduation from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). His artistic experimentation during the subdued cultural climate after the crackdown on student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 is an important counterpart to the admonitory video and installation work of his immediate predecessors.

The liberal and humanistic tenor of Culture Fever during the mid-1980s had made room for some admonitory discourse in the quasi-official spheres of print media and broadcasting. In the 1990s, these intellectual discussions took a nativist turn, looking more to models from Chinese history and less to the foreign sources that had taken hold during the reading fever of the 1980s. A seminal 1994 article in *Literature and Art Debates* (*Wenyi Zhenming*, 文艺争鸣) entitled “From Modernity to Chineseness: Inquiry into a New Model of Knowledge” articulated this shift.<sup>255</sup> Written by Beijing based professors Zhang Fa, Zhang Yiwu, and Wang Yichuan, the shift was not simply a re-consideration of nationalism, but a shift in the mode of intellectual inquiry amidst the continual economic reformation of China.

When examining the continuing experimentation with non-academic media in 1990s China, it becomes clear that there is a generational progression. By the early

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<sup>255</sup> Ben Xu, “‘From Modernity to Chineseness’: The Rise of Nativist Cultural Theory in Post-1989 China,” *Positions* 6, no. 1 (1998): 204-205.



1990s, the art student cohort, as with other disciplines, skewed toward younger applicants who had not personally been involved with the Cultural Revolution the way that their 1980s counterparts had. This generational evolution made room for artistic and intellectual inquiry involving Chinese source material that was less fraught than just a few years prior. Similar to earlier Reform Era trends, however, the 1990s saw the continuation of periodic liberalization and pluralization followed by clampdowns and censorship. In this fragmented milieu after the '85 New Wave, Zhang Huan's experimentation with performance art is significant, in that it continued the trend of exploring admonitory concepts through non-academic media following his time at the art academy.

### ***Xingwei yishu, Performance Art and Behavior Art***

*For me, performing is about not performing.*<sup>256</sup>  
-Zhang Huan, 2005

During the '85 Art New Wave, avant-garde groups and individual artists all over China incorporated performance pieces into exhibitions that also showcased the intense artistic activity. The collectively designed performance at the Southern Artists' Salon First Experimental Exhibition in 1986 was an important experiment in this medium. This work involved many elements of traditional theater and performing arts: set design, costumes, and rehearsed choreography that was performed at a scheduled event.<sup>257</sup> Art students from CAFA and the Central Craft Academy organized the performance event *Concept 21 – Art Before Your Eyes* on the campus of Beijing University in December 1986.

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<sup>256</sup> Jiae Kim, "Losing Himself in his Art," *Theme* (Spring 2005, premier issue), reprinted on ZhangHuan.com, accessed 10 October 2008, <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowText.asp?id=9&sClassID=3>.

<sup>257</sup> Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2006), 58.

This group's name derives from the idiomatic expression “*bu guan san qi ershiyi*,” – literally, “it doesn't matter if three times seven is twenty-one,” – which loosely translates to an optimistic exclamation like “throw caution to the wind” or “regardless of the consequences.” This performance was a collective action: the participants wrapped themselves in black or white strips of cloth that resembled bandages; they then “attacked” each other by throwing paint on their bandaged bodies; collectively, the group walked across campus in a way that mimicked contemporary student protests, shouting the names of important places in Chinese culture and history.<sup>258</sup> The “bandages” were partly in homage to Jim Dine's 1960 happening *Car Crash*, and the paint “attacks” were enactments of the violent militaristic vocabulary that had infused their generation's education and upbringing.<sup>259</sup> *Concept 21* member and CAFA student Sheng Qi (b.1965) described that “...even our art education indoctrinated us in military terms such as ‘wage warfare,’ ‘liberate,’ ‘unify,’... Although we were so young, we all had this feeling of being wounded.”<sup>260</sup> This group was especially concerned with the “performative” aspects of performance (*biaoyan*, 表演). After this initial event, the group changed their name to *Concept 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and over the following two years enacted performances at some of the historic sites that they had shouted as part of *Concept 21* including the Great Wall and the Ming tombs on Beijing's far northern outskirts.<sup>261</sup>

Like Wu Shanzhuan and Zhang Peili, many artists in the 1980s had begun experimenting in non-academic media that they had encountered through the information flowing to the elite academies. These two key figures experimented with

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<sup>258</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 52; Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Post-Socialist China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 153.

<sup>259</sup> Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*, 153.

<sup>260</sup> Sheng Qi, quoted in Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*, 153.

<sup>261</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 62.

performance themselves in 1986 and 1987 – Zhang Peili had participated in performances as a member of the Pond society, and Wu Shanzhuan created many performances as part of his *Red Humor* series, a conceptual umbrella that he returned to throughout his career. Many of the '85 Art New Wave experiments were included in the landmark exhibition “China/Avant-Garde” at the National Gallery of Art in Beijing which opened in February of 1989. A large-scale survey of work generated during the '85 Movement, this exhibition is usually located as a watershed moment for performance art in China because of the high profile notoriety that the medium gained after the arrest of the artist Xiao Lu following her performance at the opening. A few hours into the opening reception, Xiao Lu fired several gunshots into her installation *Dialogue* (1989, in collaboration with Tang Song). The government then shut down the exhibition and both Xiao Lu and Tang Song were arrested. This caused a chilling effect on all performance art, soon to be followed by more outright repression of all kinds of activity following the Tiananmen Square crackdown in June that same year. For years after that, performance art went underground for several years, and events were staged in a somewhat ad-hoc manner to stay beyond the reach of the law.

This lineage, however, does not situate the work of Zhang Huan, “the earliest and most influential full-time performance artist of the 1990s,” according to Gao Minglu.<sup>262</sup> As briefly discussed above, although many '85 Art New Wave artists were experimenting with performance art in the late 1980s, they did so in conjunction within a larger body of artistic production, and often as part of a collective. The performance pieces created in the late 1980s were thus related to the '85 Art New Wave spirit of experimentation, part

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<sup>262</sup> Gao Minglu, “Private Experience and Public Happenings, the Performance art of Zhang Huan,” in *Zhang Huan: Pilgrimage to Santiago* (Barcelona: Cotthem Gallery, 2002), reprinted on ZhangHuan.com, accessed 10 October 2008, <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowText.asp?id=26&sClassID=1>.

of an organized exhibition or happening, designed to gain public exposure, and often in dialogue with iconic contemporary works from the West, like Jim Dine's *Crash* or the large oeuvre of Robert Rauschenberg, including documentation of performances, that had been exhibited at his widely attended solo show at the National Art Gallery in 1985.

Zhang Huan, in contrast, came to performance art and also came to Beijing slightly later than the older artists associated with the '85 Movement, after there was already a contemporary art scene comprised of artists with a collective history. I would argue that Zhang's early work, which he began while in residence in Beijing's now-famous East Village prior to expatriating to New York in 1998, is largely the product of an inward-looking process that must be historicized with respect to Confucian eremitic practices rather than the performance art of the '85 generation. In the grammar of Zhang's performances, his body became both subject and object. This is a contrast to the example of the *Concept 21* artists. Their bodies were also the "objects" that were acted upon, but the "subject" could be understood as either an atomized collective or the general Reform Era milieu that had wounded them. Zhang Huan's engagement with photographers and videographers (especially the artist Rong Rong) to produce artistic documentation of his early performance work is a key component to understanding his solitary, eremitic pursuit, and its distinction from the collective performance works of the 1980s. It is by engaging the documentary apparatuses of photography and video that he was able to preserve elements of his behavioral performance while maintaining his status as a hermit, withdrawn from the main spaces of the art world.

In Chinese, performance art is usually called *xingwei yishu* (行为艺术), which translates approximately as "behavioral art." This term is an interesting entry point into

the early work of Zhang Huan, whose body of work in many ways can be better understood as “behavior” than “performance.” In the early 1990s, Zhang began pursuing performance as his main medium, concentrating on acts that would draw attention to and amplify his everyday experiences. He did this in an ascetic manner, attempting “behavior” in order to come to a deeper understanding of how he was negotiating the world through his sensual experiences. In his own words on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition in 2007:

My inspiration comes from the most common and trivial things in daily life, such as eating, sleeping, and going to the toilet. I try to discover and experience the essence of human nature from ordinary life. I try to experience the body and reality – survival. I despise the performing quality of the works.”<sup>263</sup>

These works, specifically the iconic *12 Square Meters* (1994) which will be investigated at length in this chapter, present an interesting set of questions with respect to the reinterpretation of Confucian admonitory practices in Reform Era art. First, the question of taxonomy arises, and a need to distinguish between Zhang’s “behavioral art” (*xingwei yishu*) and the “performances” (*biaoyan*) of the Concept 21 collective and the Southern Artist’ Salon. This distinction offers a nuanced understanding of medium and genre in the Reform Era context. While the specter of Euro-American art canons is never far from the interpretation of Zhang’s work, his practice is also profoundly linked to Confucian eremitic sources and the Chinese concept of the human body as *shenti* (身体), a “lived body” that incorporates mutually dependant mental and physical processes.<sup>264</sup>

This concept is connected to the practice of “forming one body with our surroundings” in

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<sup>263</sup> Zhang Huan, “A Piece of Nothing,” in *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, ed. Melissa Chiu, (New York: Asia Society, 2007), 59.

<sup>264</sup> Thomas J. Berghuis, “Close Encounters – Performance art practices in China during the 1990s and the role of the mediated subject of the acting body in art,” in *Sharjah International Biennial 6*, eds. Peter Lewis and Hoor al-Qasimi (Sharjah, UAE: Sharjah International Biennial, 2003), 35-36; Drew Leder, “Chapter 6: To Form one Body,” in *The Absent Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 149-202.

Neo-Confucianism, and provides another avenue to explore the experimental performance work of Zhang Huan.<sup>265</sup>

### **Formation and Education**

Zhang Huan was born in Anyang, Henan province in 1965.<sup>266</sup> His parents soon went to find work in a larger city, sending one-year-old Zhang and his three brothers to live with his grandparents and other relatives in the countryside for eight years. He has not shared childhood memories of the Cultural Revolution, but he has spoken often of the impoverished circumstances that he grew up with: his direct contact with nature, the limited food resources, and the simplicity that accompanied this poor, rural lifestyle, including the practice of children going nude when the weather was hot.<sup>267</sup> Later, when he rejoined his parents and attended elementary and middle school in Anyang, Zhang missed the freedom of the countryside and did not do well with the discipline of the classroom. He did poorly in school and started spending all of his free time drawing, alone.<sup>268</sup> As a result, he gained facility at sketching and in fifth grade was singled out for a special art training class, a Soviet style (*Su* style) art education based on the Chistyakovian methods employed at the art academies in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>269</sup> He failed the college entrance exams several times but was eventually admitted to the oil painting department at Henan University in Kaifeng. He graduated in 1988, after which he

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<sup>265</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 66.

<sup>266</sup> Yu Yeon Kim, "Brief Artists' Biographies," in *Translated Acts*, 109.

<sup>267</sup> Zhang Huan. "A Piece of Nothing," 52.

<sup>268</sup> Michele Robecchi, "Zhang Huan speaks with Michele Robecchi, Milan, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2005," in *Conversations with Photographers* (Spain: La Fabrica, 2006), reprinted on ZhangHuan.com, accessed on 12 October 2008, <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowText.asp?id=11&sClassID=3>.

<sup>269</sup> Zhang Huan, "A Piece of Nothing," 53.

taught Western art history at Zhengzhou Education College, also in Henan.<sup>270</sup> While in Zhengzhou, he appealed to the administration of his college to send him to Beijing to continue his studies, and in 1991 his petition was granted. He moved to Beijing to begin a master's program in oil painting at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Zhang's personal history and training are of special interest when evaluating his early performance works for several reasons. First, he is situated by this history as a culturally Henanese person. He has stressed that this provincial identity made him distinct from many artists in Beijing, and was a factor that brought him together with a few other artists newly arrived from the provinces in Dashancun village, soon to be named the East Village by Zhang, on the northeast outskirts of the city. This village was a cheap place to live, an especially important factor for those without the social networks of family and work unit (*danwei*, 单位) in Beijing. Chinese rural-to-urban migration increased in the 1990s, especially the "floating" population of migrants who relocated without an official residence permit (*hukou*, 户口) and often lived in substandard housing as a correlary.<sup>271</sup>

Zhang's personal trajectory also places him slightly outside the main currents of modern Chinese history. He was born just before the start of the Cultural Revolution but raised somewhat out of the way of its disastrous effects and was too young to have firm memories of that period. As a college student during the mid- to late-1980s, he was privy to some knowledge of the conceptual and performance art stemming from the '85 Movement, but his Soviet style training and provincial academy gave him limited resources and little first-hand exposure to the avant-garde currents. Unlike his

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<sup>270</sup> Chiu, Melissa. "Altered Art: Zhang Huan," in Chiu, *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, 14.

<sup>271</sup> Xin Meng, *Labour Market Reform in China* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143.

contemporary Ma Liuming, who was also studying oil painting at a provincial university (in his case, Hubei) but had a teacher who was part of the '85 Movement and worked in the medium of performance, Zhang had never been exposed to performance art before coming to Beijing. During his college years, while studying oil painting, he was interested in the work of Millet and Rembrandt although he had little access to information about or images of their work.<sup>272</sup> Perhaps most important to keep in mind about his personal timeline, Zhang was still living in Henan until 1991, and was not exposed to the Stars art group in 1979, the extremely influential Robert Rauschenberg exhibition in 1985, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989 or the student demonstrations that led to the violent crackdown in Tiananmen Square on June 4<sup>th</sup> of that same year.

When he arrived at the Central Academy in 1991, Zhang pursued studies similar to those he had already completed in Kaifeng. Both universities employed the Soviet methods in which mastering the “texture and spatial quality of a painted object” was paramount.<sup>273</sup> As his awe of the venerable institution and its professors began to fade, he began to branch out on his own and look for new sources for his art, mostly drawing from the library at the Central Academy. His extra-curricular reading was a solitary pursuit, as the reading groups and cultural discussions of the 1980s had long since disbanded. It was in CAFA’s library that he first saw the photo-performance work of Tseng Kwong-Chi, a Hong Kong born, Paris educated artist who had lived in New York’s East Village from 1979 until his death in 1990.<sup>274</sup> Tseng’s self-portrait series are beautifully composed images of the artist wearing a “Mao suit” – the ubiquitous communist uniform of mid-

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<sup>272</sup> Zhang, “A Piece of Nothing,” 53.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> Chiu, “Altered Art: Zhang Huan,” 15.



twentieth century China, which he purchased in a New York thrift shop – and mirrored sunglasses while posing in front of a tourist site, monument, or remarkable natural setting in North America or Europe.

In his early days in Beijing, Zhang Huan also came across a book based on lectures given by Zhao Wuji while a professor at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in the 1940s that was in circulation among many artists working in Beijing at the time. Zhao's writings were critical in changing Zhang's perspective on art, and a means by which Zhang was able to receive the teachings of Zhao, Lin Fengmian, and the other professors at ZFA in the 1930s and 1940s. In Zhang's words:

First, Zhao says that every part of a painting should be different from its other parts. We need to activate every part to let it breathe and to give it life. Second, you don't paint a thing because you want to paint that particular thing; you paint for your own heart, to express yourself. These two ideas completely changed my understanding of *Su*-style painting and broadened my thoughts. Before, I painted what a teacher asked me to paint. [After,] the teacher would spend two hours arranging lighting and positioning a model, but when the teacher stepped out of the studio, we would ask the model to lie on the floor. Later I would paint only a hand or a foot as I chose. I even made sketches that looked like nothing at all. When the teachers at the art institute saw my work, they said that I didn't need model [*sic*] any longer and could go home...

For a long time [after reading Zhao Wuji], I could not feel a connection with two-dimensional materials. I tried different mediums to get the feeling of closeness. Once, I found the bottom half of a plastic mannequin. One of the legs was black and hollowed. I put it on my bike and went home. I put one of my legs in one of the hollow mannequin legs – I had three legs. I suddenly felt I understood something extraordinary.... I felt that I found a way of walking – of being – that I could not have achieved before. The manner of my body's participation completely moved me.<sup>275</sup>

Thus, as Zhang began to explore different means of expressing his own artistic impulses, he was guided not by a model of performance art imported from the West or investigated by his older contemporaries during the '85 Movement, but by the words of an influential mid-century Chinese painter who had been trained in both *guohua* ink painting and

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<sup>275</sup> Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing," 53-54.

Western painting and eventually developed his own style distinct from the two after he expatriated to Paris in 1948.<sup>276</sup> Similar to the manifestation of Zhao's influence among students after his visit to ZAFPA in 1985, Zhao's effect on Zhang Huan was not in form but in spirit. While he was not ignorant of the experimental work that was going on in Beijing at this time, the avant-garde of the 1980s had gone into eremitic withdrawal from public view. Artwork at this time was in many ways a more private, insular affair, having gone underground and into the private apartments of artists in Beijing. Zhang was thus experimenting with performance art on his own, not unlike his early experience with art as a solitary pursuit during his youth in Anyang. The burgeoning scene in the East Village comprised of other young provincial artists and musicians thus developed independently from the '85 New Wave. Although he was connected with other students and artists at the Central Academy, his new work was coming out of his own desire to "create for ... [his] own heart," rather than art as a vehicle for social and political criticism like many of his contemporaries. As he described in a 2005 interview reflecting on his experimentation with the mannequin leg, "I discovered the body as an important part of my art. The body is the first language for me. The body is immediate. You can feel it. You can't feel by drawing."<sup>277</sup>

### **The Beijing East Village (1992-1994)**

It was in 1992, when Zhang Huan was beginning to collect objects and experiment with using his own body in his work, that he moved to Dashancun, a small village in the Chaoyang district between Beijing's Third and Fourth Ring Roads and the

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<sup>276</sup> For more on Zhao Wujie, see Jean Leymarie, *Zhao Wou-ki* (New York: Rizzoli, 1978).

<sup>277</sup> Kim, "Losing Himself."

site of one the city's main garbage dumps. He was still a master's student at the Central Academy, but he had never had a safe, stable place to live in the city and decided to move further out in order to afford more space. Before deciding on Dashancun, he considered moving to one of the established artists villages at Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang in the northwestern suburbs. These locations were home to artists, mostly painters, who were working in the styles of Cynical Realism and Political Pop that had already attracted international attention and commercial success. His decision to move to Dashancun was deliberate, made to get away from the commercialism and to some extent the uniformity that he saw produced in these other artist villages.<sup>278</sup>

In 1992, Dashancun was populated by several visual artists as well as rock musicians and other performing artists, as chronicled by the photographer Rong Rong in Wu Hung's *Rong Rong's East Village* (2003). Almost all of them were recent arrivals from the provinces. According to Rong Rong's correspondence with his sister (who was then still living in their home province of Fujian), these artists all came to the village for the cheap rent and were not necessarily aware of each other's presence or acquainted with each other at first, working somewhat independently and living alongside other poor village residents, most of whom made their living by sorting through garbage.<sup>279</sup> Zhang also began collecting and sorting through garbage, eventually breaking through to the use of found objects and his own body with the mannequin leg described earlier. Slowly, he came in contact with other avant-garde artists in the neighborhood, sometimes by chance, sometimes introduced through friends like Zhang Yang (a colleague from the

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<sup>278</sup> Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing," 57.

<sup>279</sup> Wu Hung, *Rong Rong's East Village* (New York: Chambers Fine Art), 2003.

Central Academy) or Li Xianting (a more senior artist and critic in the Beijing avant-garde).<sup>280</sup>

The word began to spread about the artists working in Dashancun and momentum began to build, with more artists moving to the village. Zhang began to be excited by the possibilities of working alongside and in collaboration with other non-commercial experimental artists. He read the Taiwanese artist Yang Zhihong's book *Thoughts on Contemporary Art in America* and had heard about the East Village neighborhood in Manhattan from the avant-garde artist Ai Weiwei, who had just returned from living in New York for twelve years (1981-1993) and was eager to encourage young Chinese artists to pursue the kind of experimental, conceptual art he had come in contact with abroad. In October of 1993, the UK-based performance artists Gilbert and George who had an exhibition on display at the National Gallery of Art in Beijing, visited the village and witnessed several performance art pieces.<sup>281</sup> With all this interest in and encouragement from artists who had worked abroad, Zhang decided to unofficially rename Dashancun the Beijing East Village, hoping that it would live up to its New York namesake and become a thriving center for the noncommercial, experimental avant-garde.<sup>282</sup>

In 1993 Zhang's first public performance, *Angels*, was staged outside the National Gallery of Art, where a group show featuring Zhang and his fellow CAFA graduates was being held. In this performance, created in response to the many unmarried friends he knew who had become pregnant and felt their only option was abortion, he played a soundscape of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* and covered his body and fragments of dolls in a blood-red liquid. He then assembled the fragments to compose a new "whole" doll, and

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<sup>280</sup> Zhang, "A Piece of Nothing," 57.

<sup>281</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 102-103.

<sup>282</sup> Chiu, "Altered Art: Zhang Huan," 15.

proceeded into the gallery where he hung the “angel” on the wall. This performance ultimately led to the exhibition’s early closure, with Zhang forced to pay a fine of 2000 renminbi and write a self-criticism.<sup>283</sup> This work, performed in front of an audience of artists from Dashancun and Yuanmingyuan, is remarkable in Zhang’s early oeuvre in its overtly social and political overtones and in its overt performativity. *Angels* also reveals an important development in the culture of the art academy. Although the piece was controversial and Zhang was reprimanded for having executed it, he had felt compelled to perform it in conjunction with his departmental graduation exhibition. Where Wu Shanzhuan and Zhang Peili had remained confined to the medium of oil painting during their time as students at ZAFPA in the 1980s, Zhang Huan’s tenure at CAFA in the 1990s coincided with the recent pluralization of art practice; he felt empowered to act on his own “sincere sentiment,” embodying the qualities of an artist articulated by Lin Fengmian several decades prior.<sup>284</sup>

By 1994 Zhang had distanced himself further from the influence of the academy and had become more focused on his everyday experiences living and working in the East Village. That year, he created one of his most important works, *12 Square Meters*, stretching definition of performance art and calling up the semantic differentiation between performance art and its eremetically-inflected variant “behavior” or *xingwei yishu*. While creating this work, Zhang also negotiated his “lived body.” According to Zhang, “I created [these] two works...to directly reflect our lives in the East Village.”<sup>285</sup> The urge to create a work of art that would “directly reflect” life in their particular impoverished

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<sup>283</sup> Qian, Zhijian. “Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China,” *Art Journal* 58.2 (Summer 1999), p. 62.

<sup>284</sup> Lin Fengmian, quoted in Crouch *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture*, 176.

<sup>285</sup> Zhang “A Piece of Nothing,” 58.

urban enclave is completely in line with the Neo-Confucian trope of “forming one body with ... [his] surroundings.”<sup>286</sup> The first performance was *12 Square Meters*. Zhang sat for an hour in a village public toilet on a hot summer afternoon, covered with honey and fish sauce to help attract flies:

One day after lunch, I went to the toilet as usual. The sun had just come out following a rainstorm, but there was no place to stand in the toilet for it was flooded. I had to bike to another public toilet in the village. It was relatively cleaner. When I stepped in, thousands of flies swarmed toward me... This was my life, and no one could experience it but me... Several days later I realized the performance... I sat upright and unsupported in the middle of the toilet for an hour. My body was covered with honey and fish juice, and before long, flies were all over my body, even my lips and eyes... In the course of the hour, I tried to forget myself and separate my mind from my flesh, but I was pulled back to reality again and again... An hour later, I walked out of the toilet and into a nearby pond that was polluted with garbage.<sup>287</sup>

In this work, Zhang began to play with and eliminate the performative elements of this type of artistic creation. His decision to focus on a mundane, abject activity shows his line of inquiry shifting inward. More importantly, the time and location of the performance underscores this inward focus, away from the event-based nature of performances executed in conjunction with an exhibition or other happenings. He orchestrated the event very simply, with only the photographers and videographers that he had recruited, along with a few village residents who happened to arrive to use the toilet, as witnesses. Compared with the 1993 performance *Angels*, he stripped himself completely naked, eliminated the accompanying soundtrack, and used no props. During the performance, he was silent and motionless, and the goal became not to accomplish anything or finish a task, as in *Angels*, but to endure a set amount of time under the extremely uncomfortable conditions that magnified his daily routine and emphasized the abject conditions in which he lived.

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<sup>286</sup> Leder, *The Absent Body*, 149-202.

<sup>287</sup> Zhang, “A Piece of Nothing,” 58.

Zhang himself has hinted at this when discussing his early work, stating, “in my performances, I try to experience the body and reality – survival. I *despise* the performing [sic] quality of the works”<sup>288</sup> (my italics). His overt revulsion at the elements of theatricality in his pieces and his orchestration of a small event with a long afterlife (through photos and videos) implies an interesting collapse of the time-based nature of this event. Zhang alone experienced the hour-long physical stress and discomfort, and very few people witnessed the event itself. *12 Square Meters*, however, lives on, mostly in photo documentation. The “spectators” thus become those who, weeks, months, and years after the actual event gain information about it by seeing a photograph and/or reading or hearing a description of the concept and execution.<sup>289</sup> The event is contemplated in a few moments, a much shorter period of time than the original hour that the artist dedicated to the project. The static nature of the event means that one still photograph can fairly faithfully transmit the physical appearance of the artist during the duration of the performance. Once this image and concept is internalized, the viewer can then turn to a phenomenological contemplation of the artist’s experience that Zhang is hoping to share with an audience that might also “form one body” and inhabit the artist’s eremitic milieu.

Zhang Huan claims to “despise” the performance aspect of his work because, in effect, he was not “performing” at all, which implies a level of artificiality. Rather, he was experiencing the reality of the event in the most direct way he could. He amplified the

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<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> The complex negotiation of the role of the viewer in variants of performance art received a helpful analysis employing J.L. Austin’s theory of the speech-act in Mechtild Widrich’s dissertation, “Performative Monuments: Public Art, Commemoration, and History in Postwar Europe.” This project that has greatly informed the author’s understanding of the audience’s agency in the public arena, and how it remains relevant in the realm of eremitic withdrawal. (Mechtild Widrich, “Performative Monuments: Public Art, Commemoration, and History in Postwar Europe,” (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009.))

mundane experience of using a public toilet. The piece was not an attempt to make the viewers into scatological voyeurs or himself into an exhibitionist. Instead, it offered a way of thinking about the body's sensual existence and daily experiences, something both universal and personal, a meditation on the ugly truths of life encountered through the senses. Even the title, *12 Square Meters*, resists the classification of performance art, because rather than describing his actions or the duration of the piece, it refers to the square footage of the location – the public toilet. This refers to the specific site his event, which remained unchanged after the completion of the event and would continue to function as a public toilet. The title also refers to the standard measurement of public toilets in villages like Dashancun throughout China, and the concepts of public toilets everywhere. His actions were just a heightened version of the reality experienced by hundreds of thousands of people every day, as described by Zhang's friend Kong Bu, reflecting on *12 Square Meters* years after the event:

This is the most common kind of latrine used in China. In the summer-time, the smell of ammonia drives its users to tears. Inside, these spaces are filled with buzzing flies and maggots climbing the walls. Typically a sign declaring that "Everyone Bears Responsibility for Public Hygiene" adorns one wall.<sup>290</sup>

Through this simple title, Zhang is thus highlighting the stark reality of the poor conditions that residents of his village lived with. He does not push a message of reform by drawing attention to the irony that although "everyone bears responsibility for public hygiene," it is actually under the purview of the government to provide the infrastructure for public health like modern sewer systems. He simply lived through one of his daily

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<sup>290</sup> Kong Bu, "Zhang Huan in Beijing," in Chiu, *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, 32.



experiences at an amplified level and focused inward. “In the toilet,” said Zhang, “I [could] feel the flies biting me. I experience[d] new things with my body.”<sup>291</sup>

The work that Zhang was forcing them to face was not so much the event itself, but a challenge to push the limits of physical endurance in order to transcend the body. In some ways, these concepts were not far from the physical practice of meditation by Buddhist monks that had begun to interest Zhang and led to his adoption of Chan Buddhism later in the 1990s. Where Zhang Peili challenged the audience’s patience in *30x30* by forcing them to bear witness to his long and tedious process, Zhang Huan alone endured the physical exertion of his work, and presented the audience with visual representations of his experiences.

### **Eremitic Withdrawal and the Persistence of “real beauty”**

The stillness, simplicity, and bodily endurance of Zhang Huan’s work from the early 1990s can be linked to the Zhang’s exploration of fundamental bodily sensations and experiences, an exploration that led him become a practitioner of Chan Buddhist meditation. With the work *12 Square Meters*, Zhang re-enacted the simple and powerful trope of eremitic withdrawal, implicitly criticizing the state of society and the art world with his insular performances in the abject surroundings of an impoverished independent artist. This model of the poor, educated artist who has opted out of public service to protest an immoral government has many Chinese art historical antecedents: the ragged hermit of Dai Jin and the lone fisherman of Wu Zhen, to name a few examples from the Ming and Yuan dynasties. This trope has more recent manifestations as well, specifically in the cases of twentieth century exiles Tseng Kwong Chi and Zhao Wuji. Zhang Huan’s

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<sup>291</sup> Kim, “Losing Himself.”

work *12 Square Meters* is connected to this artistic tradition. More importantly, the work draws attention to the real performance – Zhang’s inhabitation of the role of the scholar-hermit through his residence in a poor neighborhood on the fringes of Beijing.

As an elite, academy-trained Reform Era artist, Zhang absorbed the legacy of many academicians who had come before him, including the Republican Era pedagogue Lin Fengmian. Zhang’s explorations of the non-academic medium of performance was remarkably resonant with Lin’s hope that the academies would form the modern Chinese artist as a person, “with a spiritual and generous heart, with sincere sentiment, who is continually searching and thereby creating real beauty.”<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Lin Fengmian, quoted in Crouch, *Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture*, 176.

## Chapter 6

### The Ends of Admonition

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The Confucian art of admonition has persisted and been revived in Reform Era China in many forms, including the powerful artworks explored in the preceding chapters: the chaotic, illegible posters and signs in Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humor* (1986); the abstruse and tedious repair of a shattered mirror in Zhang Peili's *30x30* (1988); and the stoic, embodied dramatization of life with substandard public infrastructures in Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* (1994). These works were all experimental forays into non-academic media, but they were all executed as means of engaging an elite academic audience and they are all united in their moral messages and conceptual underpinnings. What happens, then, when a Reform Era artist attempts to address a broader public and more directly protest official governmental policies and actions?

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the general liberalization of Chinese public culture paired with steady growth in the Chinese art market created a mainland Chinese art world and spawned or revived related creative industries. This arts infrastructure fostered the exhibition and production of art in all media, and many unofficial artists who expatriated in the 1990s to escape the pressures of working in China's illiberal cultural milieu returned in the 2000s. This did not mean that the tension between state and artist was permanently resolved, it simply meant that there were many more examples of unregulated art events and activities. It is important to note that this environment is not the direct result of central planning or official policy. The arts after 2000 in China have not been excluded from official scrutiny, as evidenced by the high-profile arrest of dissident artist and activist Ai Weiwei in 2011 and the continual scrutiny

of his activities since his release. However, Reform Era policies that encouraged a transition from state planning to market-driven independence have also precipitated the contemporary art world and market. That being said, the Chinese government remains a significant patron and watch guard of the arts in ways that constrain or benefit both official and unofficial artists.

This persistent state-artist tension is an important factor in understanding the relevance of the trope of admonition and the literatus-critic in Chinese artists' praxis. After all, it was the recurring illiberal political environments of dynastic China that gave rise to a tradition of painting and poetry carefully constructed to mask political dissent. That the many and varied examples of political and artistic dissent throughout Chinese imperial history were treated with a broad brush in the post-Cultural Revolution art academy means that diverse figures were able to be considered together despite their distinct histories. As I discussed in the preceding chapters, this thick archive of literati-dissenters was known throughout the twentieth century by artists and writers.

For example, diverse figures from imperial Chinese history would have been known in the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art and the Central Academy of Fine Art where Zhang Peili, Wu Shanzhuan, and Zhang Huan studied. These would have included poet-scholars like Qu Yuan (329 BCE - 299 BCE) and Li Bai (705-762) as well as scholars who additionally or primarily expressed themselves through painting like Su Shi (1036-1101), Wu Zhen (1280-1354), Huang Gongwang (1269-1354), and Zhu Da (1626-1705). The socio-political circumstances of each of these figures varied, but the general themes of their work are similar – their criticisms stemmed from a scholar's moral obligation to speak against unjust policies or corrupt officials, often by eremitic withdrawal to rural environs. In the case of our Reform Era artists, the messages were often abstruse and

indirect, due in part to their productive encounter with the conceptual foundations of modernist abstraction – part of their extra-curricular art education. As Alfreda Murck has convincingly presented in her book *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent* (2000), the eleventh century rise of painting as a medium for expression of political dissent was due to the strict policies enacted in 1060 that made more traditional poetic commentary and criticism treasonable offences. This forced artists like Su Shi to shift away from the classical genre of “the poetry of complaint,” a term in use as early as the Han dynasty by China’s grand historian Sima Qian ( c.140-86 BCE). In place of censored text, artists crafted paintings replete with symbolic references to past literary remonstrances.<sup>293</sup> Murck helpfully acknowledges that the audience for these Song dynasty paintings was often an elite circle of scholar-artists rather than the actual sovereign or other elected officials. The artist’s motivation was equal parts remonstrance of those in power and expressing frustration to a sympathetic cohort. The medium of scroll painting was also viewed in small groups rather than publicly displayed, another factor that speaks to the insular audience of an artist’s colleagues and students. As framed by Murck, “The intent was to empathize with those who had been punished, to ridicule imperial judgments, and to satirize contemporaries for the amusement and edification of a trusted circle of friends.”<sup>294</sup> The similarities between the uptake of the medium of painting in the eleventh century and the adoption of experimental art in non-academic media during the Reform Era are interesting and compelling for many reasons. Without relying on historical determinism, these similarities present a means of approaching the concept of “new” media in a specifically Chinese cultural context. This is not because of

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<sup>293</sup> Alfreda Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2000), 1-3.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

an essentialist reading of the Chinese artist, but because these literati painters were studied by art students in the Reform Era. For example, in addition to the curricular study of Chinese painting and calligraphy, students of all majors perused early twentieth century Japanese illustrated books on Chinese art history at the library of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts that had been acquired in the early days of the academy under Lin Fengmian. These books were a rare means of studying Chinese artists and elements of Classical Chinese history that would otherwise have been presented through a Maoist lens.

As discussed in the preceding chapters, the art academies and academia writ large were the sites in which neo-Confucian philosophy was discussed and incorporated into the omnipresent negotiations of Chinese modernism, modernity, and modernization in the 1980s. The ideological pluralization in the non- and semi-official spheres of cultural production in all media and genres placed neo-Confucian philosophy within the context of these same negotiations. I believe that the subtle and indirect messages of dissent (Zhang Peili's perpetually breaking mirror held up to society; Wu's incoherent reworking of Cultural Revolution hand-written posters; and Zhang Huan's endurance of his living conditions, amplified) that were embedded in the experimental new media artworks of the mid- to late-1980s reflect these domestic dialogs. They also expose the inutility of the official/unofficial dichotomy, as some of these dissident artists had a desire to be part of China's intellectual leadership without being a part of the official art world. This is evident in the quasi-official success that Zhang Peili, Wu Shanzhuan, Zhang Huan, and many other new media artists have achieved in China.

Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie are two other such prominent admonitory artists working in new media who have become an integral part of the official art academy system. It

might seem like a fairly predictable move for the Chinese government to offer sinecures as a means of recouping a modicum of influence over these dissident artists who have achieved international recognition and market success, but these artists also benefitted from their new found involvement with the Chinese art academies. Xu Bing, a 1987 MFA graduate of CAFA, has spoken about how his current position as a vice president of the Central Academy has allowed him to tap into its network in order to get to know contemporary China and navigate the extensive changes that occurred there in the nearly twenty years since he moved to New York in 1990.<sup>295</sup> Qiu, a 1992 graduate of ZAFAs, began teaching at his alma mater which now is called the China Academy of Art in 2003, the same year that Zhang Peili returned to the academy to found its New Media Art department. Unlike Xu Bing, Qiu remained in China throughout the Reform Era, although his burgeoning career allowed him to travel abroad extensively beginning in the mid-1990s. Qiu's role at the China Academy of Art is to direct the "Total Art Studio" – a section of the School of Intermedia Art (formerly the School of Experimental Art) based on the artist's own practice. His concept of Total Art is based on the many roles he has played since his graduation from ZAFAs, as an artist, curator, critic, and socio-cultural researcher.<sup>296</sup> He believes that his research-oriented work is the key to the next phase in art education, developing rich archives on culturally significant touchstones and using that information as the starting point for long-term multimedia artistic inquiries rooted in

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<sup>295</sup> Kyle Chayka and Tom Chen, "VIDEO: Chinese Art Legend Xu Bing on Enduring the Cultural Revolution and How New York Shaped His Art," ArtInfo.com, 16 April 2012, Web video, accessed 1 May 2012, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/799216/video-chinese-art-legend-xu-bing-on-enduring-the-cultural-revolution-and-how-new-york-shaped-his-art>.

<sup>296</sup> Meiling Cheng, "De/Visualizing Calligraphic Archaeology: Qiu Zhijie's Total Art," *TDR: The Drama Review*, 53, no. 2 (2009): 17-34.

social justice and humanism. Qiu's pedagogy is thus completely intertwined with his own artistic practice and he involves his students in his ongoing multi-faceted art projects.<sup>297</sup>

The many examples of avant-garde and unofficial artists succeeding professionally in Mainland China and the official art academies after 2000 have been encouraging to liberal-minded art world players in China and abroad, but need to be understood in the context of persistently illiberal cultural policies. As this dissertation has argued, in the 1980s, artists were able to pursue experimental art modalities within official institutions. These artists maintained coded, hidden, and indirect critical practices rather acute and blatant admonishments regarding specific policies or events. When asked about how far artists can push the political content of their work in 2011 Beijing, Xu answered that art can exist in China, "...as long as it's not illegal..." and in the same interview plainly stated, "Don't ask me if students can do political works."<sup>298</sup> So what happens when an artist steps outside of the ill-defined boundaries of what is acceptable to official observers in contemporary China? The high-profile 2011 arrest of the avant-garde artist Ai Weiwei is a crucial example of the limits of admonition in a contemporary Chinese art practice.

### **The Formation of an Activist-Artist**

Arguably China's most famous artist, architect, blogger, and cultural player, Ai Weiwei should certainly be counted in the realm of China's artistic intelligentsia, but in terms of this dissertation he is the exception that proves our rule. Ai was not a product of the art academy system, but he was raised in exile in far northwestern Xinjiang province

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<sup>297</sup> Qiu Zhijie, "Total Art' Based on Social Investigation," *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* Vol. 5 No. 3, (Fall/September 2006): 77-85.

<sup>298</sup> Xu Bing, quoted in Jamil Anderlini, "Apolitically engaged; Xu Bing makes art that plays wittily with traditional styles; As fellow Chinese artists suffer a political crackdown, he tells Jamil Anderlini why, these days, he chooses to work within the system," *Financial Times* 30 April 2011, 8.



by his scholar-poet father Ai Qing. Arguably, however, Ai Weiwei grew up with some of the influence of the art academy system circa 1930 and its cosmopolitan, pluralistic atmosphere as transmitted by his father, who had himself studied briefly at the art academy in Hangzhou under Lin Fengmian in 1928 before traveling to Europe and then joining Lu Xun's League of Left-Wing Artists in Shanghai in 1932.<sup>299</sup> Indeed, Ai Qing became a Party member in 1944 during the Yan'an era (1937-1948) and served as administrative head of CAFA upon its takeover by the People's Liberation Army in 1949. His banishment to Xinjiang was part of the Anti-Rightist Movement of the late 1950s, and his primary job in exile was to clean the village's public toilets along with undergoing reeducation and public humiliation – essentially a preview of the fate of many Chinese intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution.

The Ai family returned to Beijing in 1976 when Ai Qing was deemed rehabilitated. By 1979, he was lauded as a model poet of the People's Republic and elected deputy chairman of the Chinese Writer's Association.<sup>300</sup> During the first years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Ai Weiwei studied basic academic drawing techniques with friends of his father. As the son of such a famous literary figure, Ai Weiwei was in the company of prominent Chinese intellectuals and as well as visiting foreign scholars such as the historian Geremie R. Barmé, the legal scholar Jerome A. Cohen and his wife, art historian Joan Lebold Cohen.<sup>301</sup> Ai Weiwei was accepted at the Beijing Film Academy in 1978 alongside Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou but claims to

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<sup>299</sup> Colin Mackerras and Amanda Yorke, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 73.

<sup>300</sup> Li-hua Ying, *Historical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>301</sup> Geremie R. Barmé, "A View on Ai Weiwei's Exit," *China Heritage Quarterly* No.26 (June 2011), Web, [http://chinaheritageneewsletter.anu.edu.au/articles.php?searchterm=026\\_aiweiwei.inc&issue=026](http://chinaheritageneewsletter.anu.edu.au/articles.php?searchterm=026_aiweiwei.inc&issue=026).

have not been particularly interested in film so much as “escaping society”.<sup>302</sup> Escape proved impossible. A member of an elite Beijing cohort with countercultural leanings, Ai became interested in the city’s nascent underground movements of politically-infused-art (or art-infused-politics) and became a founding member of the loose-knit avant-garde art group The Star Stars (*xingxing*).<sup>303</sup> He participated in their seminal and extremely popular 1979 exhibition installed outside the National Art Museum, the first unofficial guerilla art exhibition of the Reform Era, chronicled by Joan Lebold Cohen writing for the *Wall Street Journal* in 1981:

The group comprises about 30 artists, almost all amateurs, who decided to hold an exhibition in front of the National Art Gallery in September 1979, in anticipation of the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Red China on October 1, 1949. As a private group, they couldn’t obtain exhibition space through the art bureaucracy. They were young and outsiders.

...The group’s artistic asset is their willingness to put themselves on the line and explore. They are hampered by their inexperience as artists and their lack of technical training. More seriously, they don’t have the opportunity to pursue their art full time, to use art libraries or to travel abroad to study. They are not considered art specialists and so are denied the privileges of professionals.<sup>304</sup>

Ai’s artistic formation as a young student was thus shaped by his informal connections to senior figures of Chinese arts and literature, key Western “translators”; and the “amateur” artistic experimentation of the Star Stars. His predilection for autonomy outside the official system was solidified when he left China in 1981 and moved to New

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<sup>302</sup> Ai Weiwei and Lee Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), xviii.

<sup>303</sup> This group, more commonly translated as the “Stars,” derived its name from a 1930 article by Mao that used a common saying as its title: “A Tiny Spark can set the Prairie on Fire (*Xingxing zhihuo, keyi liaoyuan*).” Mao’s use of this phrase in an article that compared the small numbers of Red Army soldiers to “tiny sparks” was referenced often during the Cultural Revolution, and many Red Guard groups chose to take the name “Prairie Fire.” The term *xing* (star), when duplicated takes on a diminutive connotation, and the appropriation of this word by the art group referred to their amateurism – they were “small-time” when compared to the academy-trained elite artists, but might start a fire nonetheless. (Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 428; Hsingyuan Tsao and Roger T. Ames, *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 30.)

<sup>304</sup> Joan Lebold Cohen, “Chinese Art: Flowering in a Springtime Chill,” *Wall Street Journal*, 27 February 1981, 23.

York for twelve years with the express hope of becoming a famous artist in the vein of Picasso.<sup>305</sup> While in New York, he took art classes at Parsons School of Design and the Art Students League, but most importantly became an avid consumer of the city's downtown art scene. He lived in the East Village, attended as many gallery exhibitions as possible, and socialized with a wide mix of artists and cultural luminaries (including his neighbor Allen Ginsburg) as well as American scholars with ties to China and other diasporal Chinese artists, writers, and intellectuals.

Ai Weiwei's personal development as an artist in New York was fused with his political consciousness and activism as a critic of the Party's practices in China and an advocate for democratic freedoms. Although Ai did not exhibit his work much and remained a fairly passive participant in New York's art scene in the 1980's, a position he has described as being "in" but not "of" the New York art world, he worked consistently on his own artwork in many mediums and journaled on the Web, in Chinese, about his understanding of the role of art and the artist in contemporary China.<sup>306</sup> Along with other expatriate Chinese artists, Ai wrote a manifesto in 1985 declaring the need for greater artistic freedom in China, and the obligation of Chinese artists to "help the people of China to shed the past and transform into a society of free and creative spirits," but this and other such writing was never published or shared outside their immediate circle until Joan Lebold Cohen unearthed the document that Ai had given her more than twenty years prior and presented it at a panel at the Asia Society in New York in 2011.<sup>307</sup> In 1989, as many New York Chinese expatriates mobilized to draw attention to the student

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<sup>305</sup> Ai and Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, xix.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> Kyle Chayka, "A New Beginning for Chinese Art": Read Ai Weiwei's Prophetic, Never-Before-Published 1985 Manifesto," *ArtInfo.com*, 1 August 2011, accessed 16 September 2011, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/38215/a-new-beginning-for-chinese-art-read-ai-weiweis-prophetic-never-before-published-1985-manifesto>.

democracy movement and the Tiananmen Square massacre, Ai gained some notoriety for his protest actions. He, along with other Chinese artists living in New York, collaborated with his close friend Ethan Cohen, a budding SoHo gallerist and the son of Jerome and Joan Lebold Cohen, to devise exhibitions, fundraisers, and a street fair to draw attention to the student movement and protest against the government crackdown. Ai also participated in an eight-day hunger strike and formed an organization called Solidarity for China in conjunction with New York based professionals and scientists from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Speaking to the *New York Times* about the group's goals, Ai spoke primarily in terms of political advocacy:

We are contacting all human rights group[s] to prepare for a renewed democracy movement... We want to bear witness to what really happened and we want to pressure the Chinese Government to be less brutal, because we know that the Chinese Government wants relations with the West, and, especially, with the United States... We need sanctions to show our moral stance, but we cannot push too far. China's relationship with the West is what really keeps the hope of democracy alive, and we do not want to encourage anyone to go back to the old ways that existed under Chairman Mao. That would be too terrible.<sup>308</sup>

From this early point in his career as an artist-activist, Ai refused the genuflection required of artists, even unofficial ones, in China, and was a vocal advocate for widespread reform. This direct criticism of governmental policies remained a salient component of his methodology and artistic practice upon his return to China in 1993 to be with his ailing father and act upon the modes of artistic experimentation that he had observed in New York.

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<sup>308</sup> Ai Weiwei, quoted in Michael T. Kaufman, "New Yorkers Try to Defend Students Hunted in China," *New York Times* 22 June 1989, B1.

## **Installations and Incarcerations**

Ai Weiwei's artistic and intellectual formation was a unique combination of Maoist doctrine, elite Chinese literary theorization, Reform Era amateur experimentation, and contemporary Western art education – all annealed by his capacity to be a keen cultural observer of the crucible that was the downtown New York art scene in the 1980s. As with many of his compatriots who remained in China during the Reform Era, Zhang Peili and Wu Shanzhuan in particular, Ai claims that some of his most profound artistic influences were Marcel Duchamp, Dada in general, and Andy Warhol.<sup>309</sup> As an art student in New York, away from the specific cultural and intellectual milieu of China's art academies, Ai's access to the art history, art works, and artistic progeny of Duchamp and Warhol was through immersion in the New York art scene and virtually limitless literature on these topics.

His approach to installation art, one of the many media we have examined in this dissertation, is directly related to his immersion in New York. This experience was free from the strict curricular limits imposed at China's art academies, but also devoid of the Chinese art history that comprised a significant portion of the academic syllabi for Ai's compatriots on the Mainland. Also, Ai did not experience the Reading Fever that gave rise to extra-curricular study groups concerned with obscure twentieth century Western philosophy. Thus, the indirect and oblique criticisms examined in this dissertation and embedded in the new media work of Zhang Peili and Wu Shanzhuan resulted from both the circumstances of their artistic and intellectual formation and the continued pressures of uneven reform. Ai's work, on the other hand, reflects a multimedia contemporary art

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<sup>309</sup> Ai Weiwei and Charles Merewether, *Ai Weiwei: Works, Beijing 1993-2003*, (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 10.

practice that is less specific to China, and perhaps as a result is more understandable and celebrated by non-Chinese viewers.

The contrast with artists at the core of this study is useful in illuminating the limits of admonition. It is helpful in this regard to compare a few more lines from the manifesto penned by Ai and other New York based Chinese Artists going by the group name Chinese United Overseas Artists to the contemporaneous words of Wu Shanzhuan in Zhoushan, Zhejiang province.

From Wu in 1986:

I believe that between art and artist lays a vast blind ocean... As soon as... [art]... is born it lives with complete freedom... When a person guides it down a particular road, the question of whether that road is the right or the wrong one is something that person himself must face; because [in its blindness] it will accept gladly the guidance of others, unfazed by their number.<sup>310</sup>

From Chinese United Overseas Artists, written in New York in 1985:

Freedom is the condition for creativity; only through creativity can we truly experience freedom... The creative spirit honors tradition by breaking with tradition. Only by continuously moving away from tradition can we cultivate tradition.<sup>311</sup>

These two manifestos reflect a generational concern with articulating the policies and aims of contemporary Chinese art practice and in so doing defining the artist's role in society. Both essays deal with the concept of freedom as an integral component of art in contemporary China. In Wu's purposely opaque prose, the freedom is accorded to the art objects themselves, in a "blind" process detached from the agency of the artist. Rather than a corpus of art being seen as the tool of its creator, or of the policymaker that contributed to its ideological content, Wu asserts that once created it possesses the

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<sup>310</sup> Wu, "Silent Ocean."

<sup>311</sup> Chayka, "A New Beginning for Chinese Art."

“freedom” to be used, interpreted, or appropriated. In the hands of Ai Weiwei and the United Chinese Overseas Artists, by contrast, freedom is a pre-condition necessary for the creative noesis implicit in the generation of an original art practice. In their statement, tradition must be “broken with” in a creative milieu in order to be re-cultivated. This is an interesting parallel to the creative re-inhabitation of Confucian admonitory modalities by experimental Chinese artists during the reform era. Despite this resonance, the oppositional understandings of the role of freedom in art are clear. In Wu’s estimation, art must be free to exist and be misused and misinterpreted in an imperfect and ideologically fraught society. In Ai’s, the artist must first be free in order to create, while the artistic process then reinforces the artist’s freedom.

Given these divergent beliefs, it is not surprising that Wu, along with Zhang Peili and other members of their generation that graduated from China’s art academies in the 1980s and early 1990s have pursued careers that have been more or less contained within the art world, both domestically and internationally. Even Qiu Zhijie’s conception of Total Art is contained within the realm of art and the art academy. His expanded practice that includes non-art research simply informs his artist’s archive. Qiu is able to inhabit many different roles, and to put feelers out into other disciplines, but never crosses out of the rarefied space of the art world. Ai, on the other hand, has worked domestically and abroad on non-art projects, pursuing the social and political activism as well as the art that contributes to his pursuit of “freedom.” Before concluding with an investigation of Ai’s 2010 installation *Remembering* and its relationship to the non-art-world activism that led to his arrest and detention in 2011, I present the interesting case of Ai’s 1995 work *Dropping a Han dynasty Urn*. In this work, Ai is captured in three photographs documenting the urn’s short fall from the artist’s hands to the ground, concluding with the shattered

fragments of the ceramic antiquity strewn near his feet. This iconoclastic but creative destruction of tradition is a direct embodiment of the Chinese United Overseas Artists' manifesto – he breaks the priceless objects with immense historical value in order to “break with tradition.” Not only does he break the “classical” tradition represented by the Han dynasty urn, he makes no attempt to reassemble the shards and thus breaks with the legacy of tedious repair established by Zhang Peili in *30x30*. Ai's presentation of this work as three sequential photographs allows for instantaneous consumption of the action. Zhang's painstaking reassembly of the shattered mirror in *30x30* is a protracted exercise in patience, both for the artist and the viewer. It is this investment of time and consideration on the part of the audience that places *30x30*, a poor-quality video that chronicles the breaking and repairing of an unremarkable square of mirrored glass, in the tradition of Confucian literati art. Ai performs a swift and decisive modernist break with tradition accessible to general audiences from around the world, where Zhang has prepared an experience for a conclave of his peers, the inheritors of the scholar-artist tradition.

The cultural liberalization in China that occurred in the decades since Zheng Shengtian's tenure at ZAFSA was widespread, the official tolerance for overt criticism remained fairly minimal. As the political scientist Richard Curt Kraus has articulated, cultural reform in China has largely been an afterthought, tangential to the Party's goals of economic growth and political stability. While corruption is widely tolerated as an unavoidable accompaniment of desired growth, any challenges to political stability and single-party rule are taken very seriously. The 2009 arrest and detention of the writer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo on charges of subversion of the state, and the 2012 detention of the legal activist Chen Guangcheng are examples of the Party's swift



and decisive action with regards to individuals perceived to threaten that stability. While Ai Weiwei has worked openly as an artist, architect, and activist in China since his return in 1993, he has consistently tested the limits of his admonitory practice in the contemporary political climate. He has not withdrawn from all official connections; on the contrary, he accepted a 2002 commission for a park in the city of Jinhua, Zhejiang province that would serve as a public memorial to his father who died in 1996. He collaborated with the internationally known architectural firm Herzog and de Meuron for this project, and then continued the collaboration to design the iconic Bird's Nest Stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Despite his early design work on the stadium, Ai became an outspoken detractor of the Olympic project and its heavy-handed urban renewal.

Ai's boycott of the Olympics gained him notoriety, but no official sanction or interference; the architectural design work that went into the stadium more than made up for any grassroots complaining on the part of a few citizens. His personal investigations into the governmental corruption that was revealed after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, however, were coupled with his artistic projects in a way that was deemed much more dangerous. The substandard construction practices that led to the structural collapse of schools and the death of thousands of school children were questioned by many activists, but Ai's voice was distinctly heard throughout the nation and the world. He posted his findings about these inferior school buildings on his widely-read blog and was able to garner international attention before authorities shut down his blog a week after the May 8 earthquake. He was twice physically assaulted by police in Sichuan, resulting in significant head trauma that was treated with brain surgery in Germany in September

2009 when he arrived for the installation of his exhibition *So Sorry* at the Munich Haus der Kunst.<sup>312</sup>

The powerful installation *Remembering* (2010), was a new work created for *So Sorry*, covering much of the museum's façade in a 10m by 100m mosaic composed of thousands of brightly colored children's backpacks. The bags were arranged to form readable Chinese characters that formed the phrase "She lived happily on this earth for seven years," a direct quotation from a bereaved parent of one of the children killed when her school collapsed during the 2008 quake. This work marked a departure from much of Ai's previous installation work which had functioned more independently from his political activism. *Colored Vases* (2006/2008), a set of Neolithic ceramic containers that Ai dipped in colored industrial paint, and *Sunflower Seeds* (2009), a ton of hand-painted porcelain seed replicas, are examples of his recent installation practice. They offer layered references to Chinese history and culture, but in an oblique fashion overlaid with a mandarin aesthetic, simple shapes, and a refined color palette. *Remembering*, on the other hand, utilizes a linguistic signifier that presents a direct connection to a particular historical event and Ai's own involvement with its ongoing ramifications, as chronicled in his widely-read blog that was reinstated a few weeks after the earthquake. This entry from 28 July 2008 is a good example of Ai's editorial voice as a citizen-investigator and government critic:

How many people were actually killed and wounded in the Wenchuan earthquake? How did they perish, and who should shoulder the blame? Confronted with this question, the responsible Ministry of Education and Ministry of Architecture are refusing to answer, they want to eternally play dead. The parents of those school children are helpless, even though everyone now knows what happened, and why death descended upon those children. All this was predestined, this was their reality, the only reality they might encounter.

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<sup>312</sup> "Ai Weiwei undergoes brain surgery after beating," ArtInfo.com 17 September 2009, accessed 30 April 2012, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/32619/ai-weiwei-undergoes-brain-surgery-after-beating/>.

In their reality, there is no alternative fate, no other voice or alternative hand that might lead them on the path to fairness, or extend to them even the slightest bit of justice. They are saying, “It wasn’t just a natural disaster,” but who pays attention? The response is: We cried our eyes out when it was time, we donated with all our strength, what else do you want?

...In this world, there are only two kinds of history and reality, two kinds of institutions and governments: the ethical and the nonethical... In a society without democracy, there will be no space for the masses to speak their minds, and no possibility for safeguarding the power of the people’s livelihood – the result is a deceitful and degenerate reality. The masses don’t need pity after injury, they need even more a strong institution of self-protection, they need to know the facts, and they need action, the power to participate and refute.

It’s easy to say that democracy is good; it protects the weak. Within any other system, the majority of weak populations has difficulty gaining protection. Only in democratic societies is it possible to return power and dignity to the weak and impoverished. Don’t make decisions on behalf of the people; let them take their own initiative. To give them back their rights is to take responsibility and return their dignity to them.

Who will answer for China the question of exactly how many students died as a result of these tofu-dregs schools<sup>313</sup>? And to the villains in Sichuan: Does this really require concealing state-secrets? Is it really so hard to tell the truth, about even such things?<sup>314</sup>

This musing on ethical and unethical societies, mass agency in the absence of democracy, and a blatant accusation that official Ministries are “playing dead,” presents a clear picture of Ai’s identity as an activist. Another blog post, written in May 2009, a few days before the first anniversary of the earthquake, utilizes the same quotation he employs in

*Remembering:*

The rules of this ancient game are clear, they are based on eternal principles: encourage lies, erase memory, those who cause disasters escape, the innocents will be punished.

As for the innocents in this menacing place, there is but one possibility that might relieve them from suffering and bid farewell to abandonment: make zealous pleas for the truth, calmly reject further lapses in memory. Try just this once, for the daughter you will never see again, for she who “lived happily in this world for seven years,” Miss Yang Xiawan, and for her mother and the thousands of unfortunate parents like her. Continue to inquire about the “tofu-dregs engineering,” interrogate every hour of every day, until our problems

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<sup>313</sup> The term “tofu-dregs” is used in China to refer to shoddy workmanship, and the phrase “tofu-dregs schools” (*doufuzha xiaoshe*) has become universally employed to refer specifically to the type of school buildings in Sichuan that collapsed during the 2008 earthquake as the result of both local corruption that allowed for substandard construction practices and the lack of national oversight of local government officials.

<sup>314</sup> Ai Weiwei, “Does the Nation have a List?” 28 July 2008 blog post, translated and reprinted in Ai and Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, 178.

become a part of reality, until every “tofu-dregs” structure is exposed and collapses. Under extremely paranoid rule, being a chronically “paranoid citizen” is today’s only possibility for living happily and healthily.<sup>315</sup>

With this context of Ai’s extensive writings and pro-active rallying to keep these issues in the public consciousness, *Remembering* serves as a billboard-sized version of his digital rant. The signified concept is both the grieving mother’s loving memory of her daughter, and Ai’s own use of this phrase in his calls to action. It is this amplification via art and Ai’s unabashed criticism of the government’s “villainous” immorality that takes *Remembering* out of the decorous criticism of admonishment and into the realm of journalistic rabble-rousing. Even the materials of this installation are decidedly mundane and seem to belong more to the world of globalized big box retail than the elite art world. Inspired by the book bags and other school materials that were strewn around the sites of collapsed school buildings, Ai employed cheap synthetic backpacks in bright, primary colors. Blue bags form the background and monumental characters spelled out in red, green, yellow, and white bags, all eerily pristine and brand new despite their reference to the children’s belongings found in the rubble of collapsed schools. The gesture of appropriating mundane material culture for installation art is not uncommon, but the uniform newness of the materials and of-the-moment social commentary overlays *Remembering* with a sense of urgency absent in Ai’s other work and in the experimental works examined in this dissertation.

Ai’s admonitory impulse is clear, but his means of conveying it is direct and accusatory. Compared to this approach, Wu’s exploration of the visual environment of the Cultural Revolution takes on a more distinctly historical tone; Zhang Peili’s use of the

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<sup>315</sup> Ai Weiwei, “Paranoid Citizen,” 10 May 2009 blog post, translated and reprinted in Ai and Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei’s Blog*, 223.

meaning-laden symbol of the mirror is also takes on an antiquarian meaning; and Zhang Huan's patient endurance seems the embodiment of Confucian propriety. Providing additional historiographical context, Sociologist Jonathan Unger frames history's role in contemporary China as follows:

...history was and is considered a mirror through which ethical standards and moral transgressions pertinent to the present day could be viewed. This perspective on history was based in Confucian doctrine, which admonished followers to plumb the past for such lessons. It became a method of commentary about contemporary times that members of the literate class learned how to manipulate, sometimes as a means of flattering an incumbent emperor and government – but sometimes as a stratagem for chastising the imperial court.<sup>316</sup>

Where Wu continues this tradition of plumbing the past, albeit the recent past, Ai abandons this analogical exercise and keeps his work and his message firmly rooted in the present. He uses the attention that he garners as an artist to transform the gallery into another medium for promoting an activist message and a search for justice. As he commented in his blog, “May those responsible live their remaining years in ashamed condemnation.”<sup>317</sup>

When asked in April 2011 about the recent arrest of Ai, his one-time New York roommate, Xu Bing deflected all questions with the skill of a diplomat, or, more precisely, with the tact of the official administrator that he was: “My work doesn't have too much direct and obvious political content... I really don't know about Ai Weiwei's situation and I'm not really interested in politics, although I'm certainly interested in the human condition in general.”<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Jonathan Unger, *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 1.

<sup>317</sup> Ai Weiwei, “Silent Holiday,” 1 June 2008 blog post, translated and reprinted in Ai and Ambrozy, *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, 152.

<sup>318</sup> Xu Bing, quoted in Anderlini, “Apolitically engaged.”

Xu's sidestepping of direct political content reflects the intellectual formation that he and his cohort learned in China's elite art academies in the 1980s. The legacy of Cai Yuanpei and Lin Fengmian remained alive and was rediscovered in the 1980s despite the rigid official curricula that still reflected the Soviet academic programs geared toward technical proficiency. The preservation of the Chinese intellectual's role as an indirect critic and advisor was ensconced in the first academies, and passed on to these young artists of the 1980s through the academy system. Their work contains critical and admonitory content, but couched inside the elite vocabulary informed by the intellectual plurality of Reform Era China. Ai's 2011 arrest and interrogation, ostensibly for "economic crimes," cannot be decoupled from *Remembering* and the blatant and unrelenting criticisms of specific governmental policies. I believe that his artistic formation in New York, an environment where new media practices were well established, contributes directly to his unabashed use of the art to directly convey his admonitory message rather than to mask it. Where Wu Shanzhuan, Zhang Peili, Qiu Zhijie, and Xu Bing have been able to re-integrate into the official systems despite their admonitory themes and critical messages, Ai maintains his overt political identity and has been censored, intimidated, detained, and physically harmed. While he maintains a moral stance as the basis of his outspoken criticism, this morality is not tempered by Confucian distance or the moderated manner of the middle hermit. Instead, it is a moral invective and as such stands out from the quasi-official circuits of education, publication, exhibition, and broadcasting that have allowed dissident artists in China to mature into mid-career professionals invested in their national systems and positioned to effect change from within. In Reform Era China, there are limits to the extent that intellectuals in all fields can publicly criticize and admonish governmental policies. Those limits are

continually pushed and expanded, but not by Ai and his fiery ekphrastic apparatus that has resulted in a predictable crackdown and official punishment. The expansion has come through the quiet criticism of experimental artists like Zhang Peili and Wu Shanzhuan and their colleagues Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie. By re-inscribing themselves within parts of the official exhibition and education systems, their admonitory messages have become part of the formation of the next generation of Chinese artists. Cai Yuanpei and Lin Fengmian's nationalistic and utopian goals would seem to have come to fruition, with the academies helping to develop both aesthetic and ethical consciousness. In the hopeful words of Cai:

...aesthetic education... produce[s] pure and lofty habits and gradually eliminates selfishness and the concept of benefiting ourselves through harming others.... If beauty is universal, there cannot exist within it the consciousness of ourselves as differentiated from other people.<sup>319</sup>

In a 2008 interview, Zhang Peili reflected on his time experimenting with new media as part of the Pond Society in the years after his graduation from ZAFPA, stating that:

now the issues were about the relationship between art and society, between art and the masses, and these were not problems that could be solved solely through painting... we no longer considered the end result to be of paramount importance...<sup>320</sup>

Zhang's artistic working method and mediatic experimentation as a means of addressing the relationship between art and the people resonates with the "lofty" and altruistic goals of Cai and Lin Fengmian. And it is by infusing his academy curriculum with the experimental and humanistic goals of his own practice that Zhang and his cohort have preserved and grown the Chinese artist's role as the "middle hermit" – a sustainable and continuing role of critic and moralist.

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<sup>319</sup> Cai "Replacing Religion," 186.

<sup>320</sup> "Interview with Zhang Peili, 23 November 2008, Hangzhou," *Materials of the Future: Documenting Chinese Contemporary Art from 1980-1990* (Asia Art Archive, 2011) Web video, accessed 16 March 2012. [http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\\_detail.aspx?interview\\_id=52](http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=52).

## **Appendix – Key Terms in Twentieth Century Chinese History**

### Republican Era – 1911-1948

#### New Culture Movement – 1910s-1920s

The cultural movement that began shortly after the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, predicated upon reinvigorating and modernizing Chinese culture with democracy and science.

#### May Fourth Movement – 1919 – 1920s

The nationalist political movement, linked to the New Culture Movement, that grew out of the May 4, 1919 protests at China's unfair treatment in the Treaty of Versailles, more populist than the elite origins of the New Culture Movement.

#### Nanjing Decade – 1927-1937

The ten-year period when the Guomindang Party led by Chiang Kai-Shek ruled China from the capital city of Nanjing.

#### Yan'an Era – 1936-1948

The period in which the city of Yan'an in Shaanxi Province was the headquarters of the Chinese Communist movement.

### People's Republic Era – 1949-present

#### Cultural Revolution – 1966-1976

The socio-political movement, set in motion by Mao Zedong, that encouraged China's younger generation to act as fervent revolutionaries and encourage Communist ideological purity. These Red Guards were charged with overthrowing all "bourgeois reactionaries" including Party officials and intellectuals by extreme and violent means. Most schools remained closed throughout the Cultural Revolution, while large amounts of urban residents were transplanted to the countryside to perform manual farm labor and undergo "re-education."

#### Reform Era – 1978 – present

The period of reforming and "opening up" China's economy, initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, characterized by increasingly pragmatic rather than ideologically pure policies. Trends include the general decentralization of industry and the development of a market economy, as well as increasing access to and contact with the outside world.



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