

1-1-2011

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Accepted Version. "Avant Garde in Chinese Art" in *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*.
Eds. Mary Bittner Wiseman, and Yuedi Liu. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011: 295-320. [DOI](#). © 2011 Brill.
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Avant-garde in Chinese Art

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The question that I propose to examine here is to what extent or in what sense there has been an *avant-garde* presence in Chinese art. And in what sense is the *avant-garde* present in contemporary Chinese art connected to *avant-garde* in the west. Before examining the relevance of the *avant-garde* to developments in Chinese art, it is necessary to provide a brief account of *avant-garde* in western art.

I

The term *avant-garde* is typically identified with developments in modern western art. In this context, the term has both an aesthetic and a societal aspect. At the core of aesthetic *avant-garde* art is improvisation. Improvisation challenges and seeks to replace existing hierarchal systems of artistic creation. It invites new concepts including open form, inviting change and the possibility of replacing repetition of traditional forms and preset structures. Understood in this context, improvisation is a means of suppressing historical consciousness. In suppressing historical consciousness, *avant-garde* practices serve to break the chain of reliance on existing artistic conventions and thus encourage the discovery of new ideas. With

improvisation, there is the hope that artists will discover what could not be found in merely relying on existing artistic practices.

There exists an extensive body of writings on the western aesthetic *avant-garde*. Among these are the writings of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Rosalind Krauss, and others.¹ Krauss, who proposed abandonment of the term *avant-garde* as a useful concept for interpreting art after modernism, understood the *avant-garde* as being grounded in a discourse of originality related to modernism. According to Krauss, modernism centered on the *avant-garde* offered new beginnings in the history of art especially from the early twentieth century to the 1970s. She argues that its role has now ended as a result of certain critical practices beginning in the 1970s with the demythologizing of criticism and the emergence of postmodernist art in the late twentieth century.

Differences between proponents of the *avant-garde* based on aesthetic considerations and the proponents of art in support of radical social change have existed since the early nineteenth century, as reflected in the writings of Henri Saint-Simon, (1760-1825), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and others. A form of the social *avant-garde* was introduced in the early nineteenth century in the writings of Henri de Saint-Simon, who saw art and the artists as agents of social change.² Baudelaire wrote in 1851 condemning the "puerile utopia of the art-for-art school," praising instead the writings of a worker-poet Pierre Dupont who wrote expressing humanitarian themes.³

With respect to its societal meanings, Peter Burger writing in the late twentieth century represents the social *avant-garde* as an antidote to the dissociation of art from the praxis of life in a bourgeois society. Following Jurgen Habermas, Burger understands the European *avant-garde* of the early twentieth century as an attack on art, which he believed existed mainly in an aestheticized state in bourgeois society.⁴ In the context of western bourgeois society, he views aestheticism as a more or less comfortable state of affairs in which art plays a benign role when it is dissociated from practical life. Burger finds missing from the autonomous institution of art as it exists in bourgeois society the social engagement required to produce radical social change. Art, when connected to life, he believes, can serve as a positive force

against tyrannical political and economic developments and as an aid to actualizing freedom and justice. Hence he looks to the particular manifestations of *avant-garde* art as a means of reconnecting art to life. *Avant-garde* in this respect is not a matter of targeting a particular stylistic approach to art such as Cubism, Dada, or Abstract Expressionism. Rather, it addresses the societal role of art embraced by any number of stylistic differences.

These earlier discussions of the *avant-garde* often link aesthetic manifestations of the *avant-garde* to radical or progressive social thought. The social *avant-garde* recognizes the importance of connecting innovative discoveries in art to other important ideological and technological developments of the times. Yet, not all *avant-garde* developments involve both of these elements. For instance, it is possible for a work to be *avant-garde* in its ideology, while using a conventional representational painting vocabulary. For example, in France Philippe-Auguste Jeneron, who was appointed director of the National Museums in 1848 by the revolutionary government, used academic representational pictorial language to express radical social ideas.⁵ Official Socialist Realist art in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and artists in East European nations after World War II also employed traditional academic painting, combined with photography and cinematographically inspired imagery to realize radical social aims.⁶ On the other hand, Neo-Impressionist painters such as Seurat and Signac in their paintings *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grand Jette* (1885) and *A Parisian Sunday* (1889) used *avant-garde* pointalist innovations in their paintings to portray scenes of bourgeois Parisian life. Further, not all aesthetic innovators among *avant-garde* artists of twentieth century shared an interest in social *avant-garde* activities. For example, Abstract Expressionist and Color Field painters remained largely apart from radical social and political developments taking place in mid twentieth century life, as they focused on examining the essence of painting itself more or less independently of social and political concerns.

My own view of the *avant-garde* in its historic role and in its contemporary applications, embraces both its aesthetics of innovation and its role as an agent of radical social change and does not limit this concept to a particular period of art history, or to a particular culture.

I will argue that the *avant-garde* in both the aesthetic and social senses is a recurring phenomenon throughout the history of art, beginning at least in the nineteenth century. It recurs when social change calls for new art that challenges and seeks to replace existing art, or when artists become engaged in actions aimed at social change. Hence, the *avant-garde* neither begins nor ends with modernism, although modernism represents one of its important manifestations. My aim is to keep open the dialectic between changes represented in new art and the art of the past. This will include changes taking place in global or trans-cultural art resulting from the engagement of western and eastern art such as is taking place between China and the west.

These different manifestations of the aesthetic and social avant-garde found in western societies will serve as a background for identifying and assessing the emergence of avant-garde art in China. Allowing for cultural differences and temporal contexts, it appears that avant-garde efforts represent an important part of the history of Chinese art from the late nineteenth century to the present as it has in the west.

II

The history of Chinese art over the past 5000 years is varied and complex. Its complexity embraces both continuity and change. Continuity is evident in the practice of contemporary masters choosing to 'copy' the great works of past masters. However, imitation or copying art works was not practiced in any literal sense. Subtle variations in the application of brush strokes, color, and mood accounted for important differences. Perhaps this practice of drawing upon the work of prior artists is better thought of as transformation by bringing about subtle changes while retaining a deep respect for artistic tradition. This practice of modeling paintings after the masters continues through the twentieth century and into the present.

The question here is to what extent do the practices found in Chinese art, both past and present, suggest an element of the *avant-garde* resulting in artistic innovation or societal changes influenced by art? There is little doubt that the practice of mining past traditions has

had a central role in Chinese art. Indeed, such practices still exist in the major Chinese art academies of the twenty-first century. On the other hand, the words of Individualist artists of the seventeenth century, such as Ch'ing dynasty artists Tao Chi [Shih-t'ao] Kun-ts'an, Yun Shou 'ing, and Chu Ta [Pa-tashan-jen](1626 ca.-1705) suggest not all artists were content to copy the masters. A hint of the avant-garde spirit is perhaps expressed in the words of the artists Shih-t'ao and K'un-ts'an, respectively:

I am always myself and must naturally be present in my work. The beards and eyebrows of the masters cannot grow on my face ... I express my own lungs and bowels and show my own beard and eyebrows. If it happens that my work approaches that of some old painter it is he who comes close to me, not I who am imitating him. I have got it by nature and there is no one among the old masters whom I cannot follow and transform.⁷ (Shih-t'ao)

The question is how to find peace in a world of suffering. You ask why I came hither. I cannot tell you the reason. I am living high in a tree and looking down. Here I can rest free from all troubles like a bird in its nest. People call me a dangerous man, but I answer 'you are like devils.'⁸ (K'un-ts'an)

A cursory look at traditional Chinese landscapes, as well as fish, flower, bird and rock paintings of the seventeenth century Individualists offers evidence that innovative experimentation has existed in Chinese art well before the twentieth century. Experiments of these artists with brush work, color, expression of emotion, and abstraction, as well as shifting attitudes toward painting, point toward challenges to the artistic conventions of their traditional predecessors. Although aware of tradition, the Individualist artists chose to use tradition with originality and freedom, and to depart from it in their own development. Their rebellion against traditional painting of the master painters was mainly aesthetic, consisting of stylistic innovations. However, artists such as Shih-t'ao and Bada Shan Ren (Pa-ta-shan-jen) also signaled their societal discontent by adopting the lives of monks. In any event, their collective aesthetic and societal differences with respect to tradition were apparently sufficient to warrant their near exclusion from official imperial collections of the new dynasty.⁹ From these examples it is not possible to attribute to earlier developments in Chinese art a fully developed case for the

avant-garde prior to the end of the nineteenth century. However, there are at least symptoms of the spirit of *avant-garde* practices, both aesthetic and social, in these artists' work and lives as noted.

III

The participation of Chinese artists in *avant-garde* activities from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present is more complex. Important considerations affecting the development of *avant-garde* art include both developments within China's culture and history and the external influences of art in the west. In mainland China, Chan Buddhism "encourages an ironic sensibility and denies the privilege of any one doctrine in the search for enlightenment."¹⁰ By emphasizing the process of *becoming* instead of *being*, Chan Buddhism approaches art from the perspective of constant change.¹¹ This attitude essentially frees the artist's mind from attachment to any particular tradition in art and creates a natural receptivity to innovation and change characteristic of the *avant-garde*.

Another factor internal to China was the dramatic changes taking place in the social and political climate. As the Imperial system of governance ended and a new republic was established in 1911 by Sun Yat-Sen and his followers, the call for reform in the social and political system was accompanied by the demand for a new art of the people. The spirit of the reformers with respect to literature is expressed in the words of Chen Duxin, newly appointed dean of the college of letters at Beijing University in 1917: "I am willing to brave the enmity of all the pedantic scholars of the country" in support of revolutionary principles aimed at destroying aristocratic literature in favor of a "plain and simple expressive literature of the people" based on realism.¹² A similar radical view on behalf of the visual arts is reflected in the words of Lin Fengmian, a progressive artist and arts educator in an address to The Great Beijing Art Meeting in 1927:

Down with the tradition of copying!
Down with the art of the aristocratic minority!
Down with the antisocial art that is divorced from the masses!
Up with the creative art that represents the times!
Up with art that can be shared with all of the people!
Up with the people's art that stands at the crossroads!¹³

Lin Fengmian left the more conservative atmosphere of Beijing to found a new art academy at Hangzhou where he attempted to implement his ideas.

Arguably, the key external factor in the development of *avant-garde* art in China is the influence from the west. Although western pictorial means were known in China among professional commercial artists as early as the seventeenth century, these developments had little effect on other aspects of Chinese art. Western influences in art related to the *avant-garde* likely began with Chinese artists studying in Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century and with the importation of Japanese teachers into China to introduce western art techniques as interpreted through Japanese eyes to Chinese students and artists. The success of Japanese artists in adapting western art to Asian culture, attracted many Chinese painters to study in Japan as well as with Japanese teachers imported to teach art in China.

Of the numerous Chinese artists who benefitted from their studies in Japan, the brothers Gao Qifeng (1879-1951) and Gao Jianfu (1889-1933) were especially important to the creation of a Chinese *avant-garde* in the early twentieth century. The two brothers, together with Chen Shuren, are credited with bringing Japanese *nihonga* style, a blend of Japanese and western art, to Canton where they established the Lingnan School of Chinese painting. The result was a new style of Chinese painting known as New National Painting. In conjunction with his roles as artist and educator, Gao Jianfu's efforts included founding *Zhenxiang huabao* (The True Record), a magazine dedicated to promoting the new art and progressive social and political ideas.

Gao Jianfu's art was influential in the advancement of western art ideas among other Chinese artists of the period. His aim was to create a new pictorial language for Chinese art based on a synthesis of Chinese and western art. His approach involved attending to portrait painting, lighting and shade, and linear perspective found in western art and applying these elements to Chinese elements of brush strokes, composition, inking, coloring in the manner of the literati tradition of painting.¹⁴ In an effort to make the art comprehensible to the masses he focused on contemporary themes from everyday life.

Gao Jianfu's approach looked beyond painting itself to the improvement of human nature and the betterment of society. He believed that traditional painting failed in all of its social functions except for serving the elite few scholars and the literate aristocracy.¹⁵ His intent was to challenge and replace traditional art with art that would serve to reform the thought patterns of persons at every level of society. This meant replacing reflective, poetic scroll paintings and poems with art that embraces Chinese and western pictorial elements and is visually attractive, attention getting, and containing an element of shock. One of Gao Jianfu's paintings, *Flying in the Rain (1932)*, portrays a "squadron of biplanes over a misty ink wash landscape with a pagoda in the background." The painting is executed on a Chinese scroll and is said to have been based on sketches made from an airplane, a daring perch for a painter in the early age of aviation in the late 1920s.¹⁶

Such a painting would have no doubt been anathema to the literati painters of the period.¹⁷ Opponents of change did not consider the new art based on western art ideas as art at all, in the sense of Chinese traditional art. Rather, western based art was initially considered in the category of "maps, charts, mechanical, and geometric drawings apart from art."¹⁸

Gao Jianfu was politically identified with Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary political movement. He served as a local commander with oversight of assassinations of Manchu officials and the manufacture of bombs supplied to the revolutionary forces. After leaving politics, he dedicated his efforts to promoting his ideas on the role of the arts in shaping human nature and society within the art schools of Shanghai and Canton where he served as a member of the Guomindang Industrial Art commission and head of the Provincial Art School. Later on he and his brother founded the Spring Awakening Art Academy that provided greater freedom for pursuing their own ideas for reform in Chinese art.

In what sense do the changes initiated by the Lingnan School warrant the label *avant-garde*? Not all of the changes in the art of China during this era would necessarily qualify as innovations of style

when seen from the perspective of a western observer. For example, it could be argued that the introduction of western realism into Chinese painting draws upon an existing painting style and techniques previously developed in the west. Gao Jianfu's art is based on appropriation of existing techniques from western art and also of Chinese traditional art. Yet when viewed in the context of traditional Chinese art, the introduction of western art merged with elements of Chinese art constitutes a radical shift in understanding of what can be considered art. From another perspective, appropriation is a recognized practice in the creation of art in the west and also in traditional Chinese art. Picasso uses African tribal images in developing his art, and appropriation is an acknowledged practice in postmodern art of the late twentieth century. Chinese traditional artists also freely appropriate images from earlier master artists. Given the state of Chinese art at the beginning of the twentieth century, the New National Art (*xin guohua*) of the Lingnan school constitutes an important stage in the development of the Chinese aesthetic *avant-garde*. Moreover, the new art functions as a means of revolutionary social change aimed at changing the existing state of Manchu society. In this respect it also qualifies as an example of the social *avant-garde* as explained earlier.

In his book, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, Michael Sullivan describes the rift between the new art and traditional art in these words:

The revolution in Chinese twentieth century art most profound in its implications for the future was not the introduction of new media and styles, or even the change from conventionalization to realism, but the questioning—and for many total abandonment—of the traditional Chinese belief that the purposes of art were to express the ideal of harmony between man and nature, to uphold tradition, and to give pleasure.¹⁹

IV

Apart from the Japanese's introduction of western art, the influence of the Paris *avant-garde* was also an important factor. Chinese artists who travelled to Paris, then the art capital of the world, to study and practice art were introduced to the latest developments in

western art. The reception of Chinese artists in Paris was mixed. It seems that Chinese artists such as Yun Gee, who was in Paris 1927-1930 and 1936-1939, were initially welcomed with success, but ultimately experienced racial bias against Chinese that proved troubling.²⁰

The type of western influences Chinese artists chose to bring back to China based on their experiences in Paris varied considerably. For example, Xu Beihong (1895-1953) favored a conservative eighteenth century romantic realism. He used it to create landscape and portrait paintings in opposition to the modernist influences.²¹ Mayching Kao, another Chinese artist working in Paris in the early part of the twentieth century, saw many options including "the individual styles of Manet, Monet, Cezanne, van Gogh, Derain and Vlaminck ... as a repertoire from which to pick and choose."²² Among the options were a range of then *avant-garde* styles—Post-impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Dada—all at work changing the course of western traditional art. Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), chose to follow the modernists Matisse and Modigliani in bringing *avant-garde* modernism to China.

Given the availability of such a range of experimental arts, one might assume that Paris would generate considerable influence toward the advancement of *avant-garde* art in China. Contrary to expectations, the Paris *avant-garde* had only limited success in China. This may have been a result of the resistance of Chinese artists, as well as the fact that the Paris *avant-garde* seemed less relevant to the changing social and political needs of Chinese society.

The first official National Art Exhibition of 1929 featuring western influenced *avant-garde* was held in Shanghai and opened to mixed reviews. Similarly, the 1935 NOVA exhibition of the China Independent Art Association with paintings by Chinese, Japanese, and other artists inspired by the Fauve and Surrealist movements was roundly criticized in the press, and ended NOVA. However, the editor of *Yifeng magazine* featured the exhibition and included a copy of Andre Breton's *Manifesto of 1924*.

Despite these and other scattered efforts to establish the *avantgarde*, the challenges of absorbing the changes mandated by western realism, let alone the various western *avant-garde* movements that questioned traditional western realism, proved daunting. As Michael Sullivan has noted, without the support of scholarship, poetry, and the literary culture on which traditional Chinese art was based, individual Chinese artists found difficulty in establishing their own way to create art in the new styles. Opening up of the subjects of painting beyond agreeable or symbolic themes grounded in social and aesthetic harmony created major problems for the Chinese artists. For example, nude models and the nude as subject were particularly uncomfortable for Chinese artists and art consumers. These factors and a general lack of support for western innovations in Chinese culture hindered the development of a vigorous *avant-garde*.²³ Add to these considerations the fact that some Chinese critics such as Chen Yifan believed that modern *avant-garde* art must be inspired by a revolutionary democratic nationalism capable of advancing the social and political aims of China.²⁴ It was not immediately clear to Chinese engaged in the challenges of forging a new China and dealing with the Japanese occupation how the Paris *avant-garde* suited the aims of the social revolution taking place in China.

V

Since the decision of the People's Republic of China to adopt Socialist Realism as the official art policy in 1949, *avant-garde* art faced a different set of issues.²⁵ The general philosophy for art during this era was set forth in Mao Zedong's 1949 "Yan'an Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art."²⁶ In this document, Mao provides the ideological guidance for artists and writers in China after 1949. He explicitly criticizes humanism with its emphasis on human value, human dignity, and human rights and eschewed any form of art for art's sake or art that is detached from or independent of politics.

With the founding of the People's Republic at the end of the long period of Japanese occupation (1937 to 1945), a third front of western influence entered the Chinese art scene, this time from Russia. Socialist Realism became the official art of the People's Republic. Traditional Chinese art was mainly viewed as elitist and out of touch

with the needs of society. Art was essentially altered to fit the political and educational needs of the new regime or banned. From the beginning, carefully planned cultural policies were implemented through the Ministry of Culture and the official Artist's Association. The aims of Mao's policies were "to organize artists for national reconstruction, to produce art of a high ideological level and artistic quality, to organize the study of art theory on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and the principles laid down by Mao in the Yan'an Talks."²⁷ The program called for methods of criticism, self-criticism, organizing exhibitions, publishing art journals, promotion of Chinese culture, and international art exchanges with like-minded artists across the world, aiding young artists, and encouraging the people to take an interest in art.

With the decision to adopt Socialist Realism as the politically correct means of visual expression, Chinese painting underwent significant alterations. "Changes in brushwork, theme, and style," were introduced to eradicate the essence of art as practiced by the traditional masters.²⁸ There was virtually no room for art influenced by the west apart from the Socialist Realism brought in from Russia and little or no room for any form of experimental art. Landscapes populated with images of power plants or industrial work sites, village scenes honoring agrarian workers often posed with party officials, and idealized portraits of the leaders, especially Mao Zedong, became the mainstay of art of the People's Republic during this era. Subject matter and pictorial styles that did not fit the prevailing ideology were discouraged by official policy. This is not to say that the Socialist Realist artists made no important contributions to the history of Chinese art. On the contrary, the talented artists working in this mode produced some extraordinary works of great technical achievement and artistic interest for their insight into this period of Chinese culture.

The *avant-garde* in its usual sense was essentially banned during the era of the Cultural Revolution. Yet it is necessary to ask, to what extent, if any, did Chinese Socialist Realism produce its own *avant-garde* art? There are stylistic similarities in the Russian and Chinese applications of Socialist Realism; however the Chinese appropriation of Socialist Realism may have developed its own aesthetic innovations both in form and content by drawing upon matters indigenous to Chinese culture as had taken place with

previous western influences. The main problem with finding aesthetic *avant-garde* advancements was the lack of freedom for artists to experiment except within prescribed parameters.

Perhaps the most innovative social *avant-garde* development in this era was the role artists were expected to perform in realizing the socialist aims for society. Official policy insisted that artists establish meaningful connections with the people living in the villages and farms and encourage people of all levels of education and work to become involved in art. One of the central aims of Socialist Realist art in China was its program to integrate art into the lives of the people as a means of shaping emotional and ideological views. Typical images that appeared during this era featured idealized views of Chairman Mao shown with workers in agrarian villages as in the painting, "Chairman Mao Inspects Villages in Guangdong" (1971) by Chen Yanning.²⁹

The most dramatic of these changes were initiated through the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This project brought artists and intellectuals in direct contact with the working people outside urban centers. While many artists endured hardship and suffering during this era, others such as Xu Bing found creative inspiration in his time with peasants and laborers that led to some of his most original contributions to *avant-garde* art. Xu Bing (1955-), who began as a printmaker, lived and worked with the village people during the Cultural Revolution. During this period, he experimented with block prints and developed a unique series of prints depicting village lives that became the "Five Series of Repetition" (1987).³⁰

The deployment of Mao's philosophy through the period of the Cultural Revolution effectively discouraged any development of aesthetic *avant-garde* art outside of that framework until after 1976 when the Cultural Revolution ended with Mao's death. However, the conditions for art during this era were not static, and not all artists chose to interpret the mandate of Socialist Realism in the same way. Gradually, the official policy on art recognized that both traditional Chinese painting and the art practices of nations other than Russia, when adapted to the needs of society, might have value for serving the interests of the people.³¹ Still, the political constraints on art essentially remained in place until 1979 when, in varying degrees,

China once again became receptive to new developments in art outside the framework of officially sanctioned art.

VI

Again, the main emphasis for the post-1980s *avant-garde* came initially from the West. This time the major influences in Chinese *avant-garde* art came via the United States.³² By the 1950s, New York had replaced Paris as the world art capital, with the result that much of the new influence for *avant-garde* developments during the second half of the twentieth century would come through New York. From Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol, artists continued to challenge traditional western approaches to art. This latest stage of western influence on the *avant-garde* in China has taken place with the easing of east-west tensions in the 1980s and the emerging of globalization in the art world. Globalization enabled Chinese artists to establish studios in the main western art capitals of Europe and America. The rise of contemporary Chinese artists to international prominence also brought Chinese artists at home in greater contact with western influences. One consequence of the move toward globalization is that Chinese artists moved away from identity grounded in their regional histories and culture in search of transnational identity. As a result, national borders and societal reforms internal to the nation gave way to the search for transnational issues and a greater focus on the artist's own self-identity as a ground for the new art.³³

In an attempt to define the *avant-garde* for the era of Chinese culture after 1979, Gao Minglu offers the following statement:

The art of the Chinese *avant-garde* might be considered alien in the context of Chinese society. Its formal terms are foreign to traditional art, official art, and academic art. Its social and political ideas also are alien to the status quo, as *avant-garde* artists pushed traditional political and social structures along a more progressive course.³⁴

Moving into the present, there is no common political or aesthetic orientation to be found among the *avant-garde* artists of this period, as more and more artists seek their inspiration from personal insights and explorations. At this point, the *avant-garde* has shifted in many

directions and is undergoing constant changes. Here are a few of the highlights to round out our account and bring the matter up to the present.

Among the important moments for *avant-garde* art of this later period in China were the exhibitions of the Stars group. Their exhibitions begin in 1979 with an informal exhibition of 'protest' art against official art. The first Stars exhibition was held on the street outside the National Art Gallery in Beijing. The main focus of this exhibition was to mount a critical response to the Cultural Revolution and to the perceived continuation of oppressive conditions for artists following that era. Police intervention cancelled the exhibition after two days, resulting in a protest march. However, subsequent exhibitions of the Stars group took place with legal recognition in a Beijing Park and in the National Museum itself in 1980 in what was seen as a compromise with Chinese cultural officials. By the mid 1980s *avant-garde* experimental movements had spread across China to form a nationwide network of *avant-garde* artists, culminating the '85 Art New Wave movement.³⁵

In part as a response to an anti-western movement known as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement, a series of *avant-garde* art events took place between 1985 and 1989 throughout twenty nine provinces of China. Exhibitions and discussion among artists were supported by magazines and newspapers such as *Fine Arts in China* (Beijing), *Artistic Currents* (Hubei), and *Painters* (Hunan). The culmination of these efforts took place in February 1989 with the exhibition *China/Avant-garde* at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. Included were major artists Xu Bing, Wang Guangyi, Gu Wenda and others. This exhibition was intended as a major confrontation with official Chinese art as it directly attacked Communist ideology and official art politics. Not surprisingly, *China/Avant-garde* generated sizable consternation and was closed down periodically during its two week run by Chinese officials. A few months later, the incidents on June 4 at Tiananmen Square effectively closed down *avant-garde* operations for the next several years. Shortly afterward in 1990, major Chinese artists Wu Shanzuhan, Xu Bing, and Gu Wenda left for exile in the west and focused on developing their international careers with occasional presentations in China.

Cancelled exhibitions became important vehicles of *avant-garde* art of the 1990s in China. The term 'cancelled exhibition' refers to exhibitions that proceed through concept development, planning, design, installation, censorship, and ultimately cancellation. This means that the exhibition exists as a material reality, except that it never officially opens to the public because of last minute notifications of failure to comply with official permissions. Despite the fact that the exhibition does not open, it nevertheless takes on a different meaning. With cancelled exhibitions, the focus shifts from the exhibition space as a venue for viewing the art on display to a place of public speculation, resentment, and protest. Wu Hung's reconstruction and analysis of one such exhibition, *It's Me: An Aspect of Chinese Contemporary Art in the 90s*, an exhibition planned to open in Beijing November 1998, is useful in understanding this development.³⁶

While moving toward increased tolerance of non-official art, the Chinese art policies as reflected in the actions of the National Association of Chinese Artists and the Ministry of Culture have oscillated between greater flexibility and periodic retrenchment. Nevertheless, in subsequent years China experienced a new wave of western art, mainly coming from the United States initially in such forms as the Political Pop art movement that in part translated into a focus on market oriented art.

Once more, these new developments have introduced into China art that fits neither traditional Chinese art nor the art of the Socialist Realism era. This situation is increasingly generating a series of cultural crises for contemporary Chinese artists. In the 1980s and subsequent years, the answer for a number of talented Chinese artists was exile to Europe or America. By the 1990s and continuing into the early years of the twenty-first century, Chinese artists have risen to the forefront of the international art market.

Prominent international contemporary Chinese artists including Gu Wenda, Wang Tiande, and Xu Bing, whose work is respected both in the west and China, drew significant aspects of their work from their reflections on the tradition of Chinese calligraphy while producing

their avant-garde art. Artists such as Qin Feng, Feng Mengbo, Ma Bao Zhong, Liu Fenghua and others in very diverse styles pay homage to the highest achievements of Chinese art and culture, past and present, while also incorporating the inventions of twentieth century masters from the west.³⁷ The question has been raised, whether by such efforts artists are honoring or undermining a Chinese tradition, expanding on it or emptying it of significance.³⁸

With respect to the *avant-garde*, success in the international art market operates in conflicting ways. The art market fosters a form of planned obsolescence in its demand for new art, not unlike the industrial and technology market where innovation and change perpetually drive the demand to create new products. In doing so, the market offers a temptation to artists to produce works that satisfy a global market demand irrespective of their artistic significance. This matter is of increasing concern as young artists barely out of art school are drawn into the booming market for contemporary Chinese art before they have time to reflect on and develop their ideas and talents.³⁹

At this moment, Chinese artists who previously chose exile are being welcomed back into the Chinese arts community. For example, Xu Bing, one of the most famous, returned in 2008 as vice-director at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. This turn signals a new consciousness among artists of the importance of Chinese culture past and present and its implications for creative future artistic developments in China. At the root of the current interest in Chinese art are certain key factors: increased artistic freedom to experiment, a growing nationalism that celebrates what is distinctively Chinese and is also fitting for strategic placement in a global context, and increased recognition on behalf of Chinese officials of the importance of art for the Chinese economy. The latter has led to growing infrastructural support for the burgeoning art developments in China.

Hence Chinese artists of the present generation must struggle with the question of how their work relates to tradition and to the circumstances of contemporary life, both internally in China and in the global world. As they experiment with and modify Chinese art and culture, a central problem for the *avant-garde* artists of today is to

discover how to build upon their Chinese cultural heritage and also connect to the new developments of contemporary life in China and throughout the world.

For some, the influence of Chan Buddhism continues to be an important theoretical source for the *avant-garde*. Artist Huang Yong Ping cites Chan Buddhism as the basis for his theory of the *avantgarde* when he advocates destruction "of doctrine, institutional authority, master texts, ideology, authorship, subjectivity."⁴⁰ He notes that, when combined with Dada from the west, Chan Buddhism becomes "a potent weapon in the Chinese avant-garde's assault on business as usual," by aiding in upsetting aesthetic, social, and political conventions. Chan Buddhism's concept of emptiness also informs the work of artists such as Xu Bing whose unreadable *Book from the Sky* (1987) is said to evoke receptivity in the viewer to a richer realm of truth or enlightenment.⁴¹ *Book From the Sky* is a work of monumental aesthetic and social import, which consists of four books printed using more than a thousand unreadable characters familiar in their likeness to traditional Chinese characters, all invented by the artist. This work aims to force the viewers to disengage from their relationship to the symbols of language and reflect in new ways on the role of language in reference to cultural identity.

In the non-official popular culture of the 1990s, language entered into *avant-garde* practices in the form of humorous or ironic sayings screened onto T shirts or cultural shirts (wen hua shan). The cultural T shirts movement was initiated by a young Beijing artist-designer, Kong Yonqian, in 1991. Within a short period of time his anarchic cultural T shirts appeared on the streets of Beijing and across the nation as a form of social protest against perceived failures of reform efforts. The aim of this movement was to use "nonofficial colloquial language to communicate sentiments that many people shared but were unable to give voice to in public."⁴² This effort differed from other *avant-garde* projects as it brought the *avant-garde* into the marketplace and engaged a mass audience instead of a limited segment of the arts and intellectual communities. Through its aphoristic sayings the cultural T shirt movement engaged in the emerging debate over contemporary encounters between western and

Chinese culture and the question of reinterpretation of elements of Chinese culture.⁴³

VII

Thus in some form, the question on the mind of every serious Chinese contemporary artist is, how to remain connected to Chinese roots and also create art that is meaningful and appreciated in a changing world where east and west are drawn ever closer. Addressing these changes is not a question of Chinese art versus western art. Rather, the practice of art in a global context has become a matter of enabling individual artists to create, using ideas and visual forms irrespective of their particular cultural origin. This means that the artists have available an evolving universal vocabulary of artistic means, including their Chinese heritage and avant-garde innovations, contributed over time from the practices of artists working in many cultures east and west across the world.⁴⁴

What are the implications of these developments for the current state of avant-garde in China today? The art systems in China today operate on a variety of levels. Government supported enterprises include painting academies at the national and provincial levels, military art centers, the China Artists' Association, art institutes such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and other academies and departments of art in the Normal Universities throughout China. Amateur artists who practice art as a means of personal cultural Development continue a longstanding tradition in China. Free professional artists, who work independently and rely on their own resources, represent an increasingly larger population among Chinese artists today.⁴⁵

Avant-garde art thus operates in reference to the other forms of art operating in China today. These forms include: "(1) a highly politicized official art directly under sponsorship of the party, (2) an academic art that struggles to separate itself from political propaganda by emphasizing technical training and higher aesthetic standards, (3) a popular urban visual culture that ... absorbs fashionable images from [external sources], and an international commercial market."⁴⁶ Among these artist groups working in China today there are many

different levels and variations, both ideological and aesthetic. The free professional artists are the most likely, though not the only, source of *avant-garde* art in China today. The outcome of our study does not in any sense suggest a return to Chinese traditional art without regard to the *avant-garde* and other newer cultural developments. Rather, the situation invites artists, especially those among the free professional artists aspiring to international connections, to continue to develop new ideas for art incorporating their cultural histories and those of others.⁴⁷ There are signs that artists are eager to find new directions for Chinese art. With the tools of western art and traditional art in hand, they are ready to think of Chinese art in new ways. Their aim is to go beyond the changes based on western art toward a new contemporary art surpassing the limitations of the western dominated forces of globalization of the 1990s to a new era that recognizes Asian art as an equal partner alongside western art. And yet such undertakings cannot be embarked upon without risk. The effort to create bridges between tradition and innovation are often met with skepticism, as the Daoist Zhuangzi (c. 369-286) understood. Similarly, the distribution of benefits both cultural and natural can lead to clashes of culture leading to violence and dysfunctional societal and cultural outcomes. Even the forces of nature depicted so beautifully in a painting can be merciless in their unequal disbursements of beauty and human suffering, as recurring earthquakes and floods attest.

VIII

Before concluding, it is useful to address briefly the similarities found in examining the *avant-garde* in Chinese art with reference to its place in western art. The comparison offered here suggests more similarities than one might expect to find. For example, the emergence of *avant-garde* art in the west required a break in tradition from classical ideals of art accumulated from antiquity through the Renaissance, just as the introduction of *the avant-garde* into China resulted in challenges to traditional Chinese art. In western art, the subject matter for paintings was mainly dominated by themes from the Bible and scenes portraying Christian saints, or characters of Greek mythology. Allowing for differences in understanding the meaning of beauty and the approaches to representation of nature, whether as skillful imitation or as idealized nature, these ideas and

subject matter formed the main core of western art until the end of the nineteenth century. It was only after the French revolution that artists were free to choose their subjects based on imagination and a broader range of interests. The shock effect of innovations in painting such as giving priority to color over correct drawing introduced by Eugene Delacroix (1799-1863) and the new realism based on direct observation of nature introduced by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Edouard Manet (1832-1883) were only the beginnings of challenges to be mounted in the west against established conventions of previous approaches to painting.⁴⁸

In China, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the traditional arts including landscape painting and calligraphy functioned similarly to the classically based paintings in the west, that is, as the opposition to emerging *avant-garde* art. A look at the responses of Europeans to the new developments in western art suggests that the shock and resistance was no less evident among traditionalists in the west than were the responses of the Chinese traditionalists to the introduction of *avant-garde* ideas and practices into Chinese art. Perhaps the main difference is that the primary impetus for the *avant-garde* in China was a result of external influences instead of being indigenous to Chinese culture.

IX

In conclusion, this overview of *avant-garde* developments suggests that the *avant-garde* in China has maintained a presence in a variety of societal conditions, both democratic and otherwise, and remains vital to a healthy climate for the arts and for society in general. Its presence has contributed to expanded artistic freedom and increased societal tolerance. Additionally, the persistence of the *avant-garde*, often in the face of official resistance and the reticence of traditionalists, assures a healthy ongoing tension between the traditional culture and the infusion of new ideas. At the same time, the social *avant-garde* assures challenges to complacency and stagnation necessary to maintain a vital, living society.

Based on my own recent first hand observations of the status of art in China today, it appears that art is experiencing unprecedented

energy and growth. The expansion of art zones such as 798, Songzhuang Village, and many others throughout Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities, exceeds anything that has taken place with respect to art elsewhere in the world. Within these developments, the *avant-garde* continues to thrive. Nowhere is the vitality of traditional Chinese culture fused with *avant-garde* creativity more vibrantly expressed than in the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics where 16,000 performers demonstrated the cultural genius of China past and present for all the world to see. Given the energy and talent evident in these new developments in the art of China, we should expect to see the direction of influence in the arts increasingly turning from west to east. This development may well reverse the historic pattern where the major impetus for new ideas in the arts previously relied on the influence of innovations contributed by the artists of the west. While the influences of the east on art in the west have not been absent, as the 2009 Guggenheim exhibition, *The Third Mind* demonstrates,⁴⁹ perhaps the future generations of the *avant-garde* will rely even more on the artists of the east than has been the case in recent times.

As the twenty-first century unfolds, the world centers for new developments in art are increasingly plural rather than focused in a single geographic space such as Paris or New York. The new centers for innovation and change are as likely to be in Asia, Africa, or Latin America as in Europe or the United States. Hence it will not come as a surprise that the future centers of artistic innovation are increasingly to be found in Beijing or Mumbai. The global art world of today welcomes the best of creative efforts from everywhere in the world. At the moment, art in China is at the forefront.

Notes:

¹ Clement Greenburg, "Culture in General: Avant-garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, University of Minnesota Press, 1984; Harold Rosenberg, "Avant-garde," in *Quality*, edited by Louis Kronenberger (New York: Atheneum, 1969) pp. 418-449; Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), p. 156. Hal Foster argues against "a premature dismissal of the avant-garde" noting that critical theory of the middle 1970s was itself a secret continuation of the avant-garde. See Hal Foster, *The Return of*

- the Real: The avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1966), pp. 5-15. See also Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Gerald Fitz (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- ² Henri de Saint-Simon, *Opinions Litteraries, Philosophiques et Industrielles* (Paris, 1825). *Oeuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin (1865-1879)*, vol. 39. Reprint, Aalen, 1964.
- ³ Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-garde: France, 1830-1880," in Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery, eds, *The Avant-Garde* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) p. 12.
- ⁴ Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 49.
- ⁵ Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-garde: France, 1830 to 1880," p. 12.
- ⁶ Boris Groys, "The Other Gaze: Russian Unofficial Art's View of the Soviet World," in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 59.
- ⁷ Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), p. 115.
- ⁸ Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), p. 115.
- ⁹ Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), pp. 115-125.
- ¹⁰ Gao Minglu, "Conceptual Art with anti-conceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, catalogue, Queens Museum of New York, 1999, p. 127.
- ¹¹ Kenneth K. Inada, "The Buddhist Aesthetic Nature: A Challenge to Rationalism and Empiricism," *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1994). See also Gao Jianping, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art: From Calligraphy to Painting* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Aesthetica Upsaliensia 7, 1996) p. 192.
- ¹² Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p 33.
- ¹³ *Meichu (1986:4) 64n.2.* cited in Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 44.
- ¹⁴ Christina Chu, "The Lingnan School and Its Followers: Radical Innovations in Southern China," in Julia F. Anderson and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 1998), p. 68.
- ¹⁵ In contrast to Gao Jianfu's revolutionary approach to art intent on making art accessible to the people, the aristocratic tradition limited access to famous paintings based on social standing. Viewing important works of

art was considered a limited and intense social experience with rules and prescriptions on how to visualize or contemplate the art. See Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1997) pp. 112, 114-117.

- ¹⁶ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 52-55.
- ¹⁷ Michael Sullivan, who admits his antipathy to the Lingnan art, believes that the school was based on a misconception of the nature and purpose of art in its lack of passion for form. He argues that the Lingnan movement was limited in its influence because of anti-Japanese feeling in China based on aggression toward China and its location in Guangdong Province out of the main centers in Shanghai and Beijing. See Sullivan, pp. 57.
- ¹⁸ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p 32.
- ¹⁹ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 26.
- ²⁰ Arthur A. Young, "Yun Gee: Interpreter of East to West," Anthony W. Lee, editor. *Yun Gee: Poetry, Writings, Art Memories* (Pasadena Museum of California Art in Association with University of Washington Press, 2003), pp. 154-158. Yun Gee, a young artist from South China who immigrated first to San Francisco and then to Paris from 1927 to 1930 found acceptance of his art in the French art world, but lamented a lack of racial tolerance of the French toward the Chinese and China's culture. See also Joyce Brodsky, *Experiences of Passage: The Paintings of Yun Gee and Li-Lan* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 26. Yun Gee did not return to China, but instead returned to the United States and subsequently lived in New York.
- ²¹ See Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 59, 71, 72. And Kuiyi Shen, "The Lure of the West," in Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: The Guggenheim Museum, 1998) pp. 177, 178.
- ²² Mayching Kao, "The Beginning of Western-style Painting Movement in Relationship to Reforms of Education in early Twentieth-Century China," *New Asia Academic Bulletin* 4 (1983):99.
- ²³ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 66.
- ²⁴ Che'en I-Fan, "The Modern Trend in Contemporary Chinese Art," *T'ien Hsia Monthly* (January 1937), p. 47. Also cited in Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 67.

- ²⁵ For an overview of art and politics during this period, see Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998).
- ²⁶ See Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies No. 39, 1980).
- ²⁷ Michael Sullivan, *Michael Sullivan, Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 129.
- ²⁸ Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China 1949-1979* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 2
- ²⁹ See Holland Cotter, "Artists Toe the Party Line," review of "Art and Revolution," exhibition, Asia Society, 2008-2009, *New York Times* review, 30 Britta Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words: The Art of Xu Bing* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution and University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 38.
- ³¹ See Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), 135-147 for a discussion of the changes in artistic policies during the era of Mao Zedong. In 1956 Zhou Enlai established research institutes where traditional artists were able to preserve their art. See Julia F. Andrews, "The Victory of Socialist Realism: Oil Painting and the New Guoha," in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998) p. 228 ff.
- ³² Until the 1980s the artists working in the United States seem to have had little influence on Chinese artists. Before this time, the main direction of artistic influence with respect to China and the United States was from east to west. The reasons for the absence of American influence in Chinese art prior to the 1980s are complex. A Chinese Exclusion Act banning immigration of Chinese laborers into the United States was in effect from 1882 to 1942. After 1942, the political climate and the internal focus of Chinese culture were not receptive to American *avant-garde* influences. On the other hand, Chinese and other Asian influences were influential in American art and aesthetics. The philosopher-aesthetician John Dewey visited China for a year during 1919-1920 and participated in exchange of ideas with Chinese intellectuals. Later in 1934, American artist Marc Toby, whose work reflects the influence of Chinese brush painting, visited China. The importance of Asian influences including Chinese on American artists is documented in Alexandra Munroe's exhibition catalog, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* published on the

- occasion of the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, "The Third Mind..." January 30-April 19, 2009.
- ³³ Leng Lin, "Preface to It's Me" in Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000) pp. 106, 107.
- ³⁴ Gao Minglu, *Fragmented Memory*, edited with Julia Andrews (Wexner Center, Ohio State University, 1993), p. 4.
- ³⁵ Wu Hung, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum, University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 19.
- ³⁶ Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 2000). Wu Hung organized the exhibition "It's Me: Cancelled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China," in 2000 at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, as a pedagogical means of analyzing the state of exhibiting contemporary Chinese avant- garde art. (Hung prefers the term experimental art). His catalogue provides analysis of the 1998 exhibition curated by Leng Li, pp. 106 ff, and documents a total of twelve cancelled exhibitions from the 1990s.
- ³⁷ See Curtis L. Carter, "Art Without Cultural Borders: Reflections on Qin Feng's Art," *Qin Feng* (Beijing: Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), pp. 82-84. Curtis L. Carter, "Ma Baozhong: Creating a Visual Theater of Power," *Touch: Ma Baozhong's New Works (Beijing: X in Beijing Art Gallery, 2008)* pp 13-19. Curtis L. Carter, "Contemporary Ink Painting," (Beijing: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Fairbank Center of Chinese Studies, Harvard University, 2009; Berlin: Raab Galerie, National Dr. Sun Yet-Sen Memorial Hall Taiwan, 2009), pp. 20-23.
- ³⁸ See Holland Cotter, "Pictorial Delights Beyond Words," *New York Times*, September 8, 2006, review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, "Brush and Ink: The Chinese Art of Writing," September 2, 2006-January 21, 2007.
- ³⁹ Commercial pressure on young artists has reached even the highest levels of training for young Chinese artists including the state run Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts where buyers and collectors now visit the school in search of the next art star and students are given commercial exhibitions at galleries even before completing their studies. See David Barboza, "Schooling the Artists' Republic of China," *New York Times*, March 30, 2008.
- ⁴⁰ Gao Minglu, "What is the Chinese Avant-garde?" Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, *Fragmented Memories: The Chinese Avant-garde in Exile* (Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1993).

- ⁴¹ Huang Yong Ping, "Xiamen Dada: A sort of Postmodernism," *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* (China Art Press), No. 46 (1986). Cited in Gao Minglu, "Conceptual Art with Anti-conceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980*, exhibition catalog, Queens Museum of Art, New York, April 28-August 29, 1999 et al., p. 127.
- ⁴² Geremie R. Barme, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 145, 149.
- ⁴³ Kong Yongqian's cultural T Shirt effort resulted in his detainment, release without being charged, and official confiscation and destruction of a portion of his Cultural T Shirts. Reportedly, officials viewed his shirts as "the most serious political incident that had occurred in the capital since June 4, 1989." See Barme, p. 145.
- ⁴⁴ See Curtis L. Carter, "Conceptual Art: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?" *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Vol 8, 2004: 15-28.
- ⁴⁵ Wang Chunchen, "Current State of Chinese Art," in this volume.
- ⁴⁶ Wu Hung, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1991) p. 12.
- ⁴⁷ See for example, the exhibition, *Bags of Stone Grinding Against Each Other*, National Art Museum, Beijing, September, 2008 and Museum of Far East Antiquities, Stockholm, November, 2008. Stones rubbing together is intended as a metaphor of two civilizations, east and west, coming together to forge a new art for the future.
- ⁴⁸ E . H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, MCML), Ch. 24, 25.
- ⁴⁹ Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*. *The Third Mind* shows the importance of Asian art, literature, and philosophy for American art from early modern to contemporary art, including artists from James McNeill Whistler to Marc Tobey, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, and John Cage.