

**The Spirit of Individualism:
Avant-Garde Art in Shanghai 1979-1989**

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of The Australian National University.

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Declaration

As the author of this thesis, I declare it to be my original work. It contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. It has not been submitted for any other degree.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lansheng Zhang', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Lansheng Zhang

08 July 2019

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of avant-garde art in Shanghai from 1979 to 1989 and the role that it played in contemporary art in mainland China in the 1980s. The artists and art administrators discussed in this thesis, I argue, were at the forefront of the development of contemporary art in China through artistic experimentations and institutional engagement in avant-garde art activities. Contemporary Chinese art emerged in the international arena in the early 1990s and began to attract the attention of art professionals and collectors. It went on to become a strong force globally in the first decade of the new millennium. Its emergence in this timeframe mirrors another Chinese phenomenon — that of the revitalisation of Shanghai to lead China's economic development trajectory onto the world stage. These Chinese phenomena signify the 1980s, the decade following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, through unprecedented political and economic reforms with their transforming impact on art and culture, as being critical to the study of contemporary art in China. Shanghai, with its semi-colonial, political, economic and cultural history, including the strong legacy of the early twentieth-century modernist art movement, has played a vital role in China's modernisation and presents itself as a unique case in the evolution of contemporary art in China.

Art historians and critics, both in China and internationally in recent years, have been increasingly interested in exploring contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s. From my observations and my research findings, avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s has nevertheless been neglected in the discourse and still lacks in-depth scholarly study. This thesis is intended to fill this lacuna in the narratives of China's contemporary art history. It is based on empirical evidence from my personal experiences as a practising artist in Shanghai during this period, my long-term friendship with key artists and art administrators and writers, and extensive new research I have undertaken. In this thesis, Shanghai avant-garde art in the 1980s is examined through case studies of the Shanghai Art Museum and six artists: Zhang Jianjun, Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Chen Zhen, Cai Guoqiang and Gu Wenda. I argue that the essence of avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s was the quality of individualism displayed by artists who resisted the collectivist ethos in China in this period. These artists also retained strong historical connections to the early twentieth-century modernist art movement in Shanghai. I demonstrate in the thesis that these elements have been overlooked in the national and international discourse on contemporary Chinese art and that this has resulted in inadequate representations of the Shanghai avant-garde art in the decade of the 1980s in the art historiography of contemporary China.

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Introduction

This thesis is a study of avant-garde art¹ in Shanghai from 1979–1989² and the role that it played in the development of contemporary art in mainland China in the 1980s.

Contemporary Chinese art emerged in the international arena in the early 1990s and began to attract serious attention by art professionals and collectors. It went on to become a strong force in global art in the first decade of the new millennium. Its emergence in this timeframe mirrors another Chinese phenomenon — that of the revitalisation of Shanghai to lead China’s economic trajectory onto the world stage. These Chinese phenomena signify the 1980s, the decade following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) through unprecedented political and economic reforms with their transforming impact on art and culture, as being critical to the study of contemporary art in China. Shanghai, with its semi-colonial, political, economic and cultural history, I contend in this thesis, has played a vital role in China’s modernisation and presents itself as a unique case in the evolution of contemporary and avant-garde art in China in the decade of the 1980s.

One critical question this thesis seeks to address is what was distinctive in avant-garde art in Shanghai during the 1980s. In the thesis I put forward the argument that the essence of avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s was the quality of individualism, for which I use the term “the spirit of individualism.” I define individualism as used in this thesis in the context of Chinese modern and contemporary art as artists pursuing freedom of ideas and art expression in contrast to the prevailing tendency of a collectivist ethos.³ Another critical factor in shaping Shanghai’s avant-garde art in the decade of the 1980s, I argue, was the strong connection artists in Shanghai retained to the early twentieth-century modernist art movement for which I use the term “the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism.” Individual artists and art administrators in Shanghai were, I also suggest, at times significant catalysts in the changes in contemporary art in China in the 1980s. Through my research and review of key literature from China and internationally, I have identified the chronological displacement of works by Shanghai artists in influential writings on art production during the

¹ The term “avant-garde art” is an approximate English translation from the Chinese terms “Qianwei Yishu 前卫艺术” and “Xianfeng Yishu 先锋艺术” that were widely used by Chinese artists and art critics in the 1980s. Since the discourse of art and art production discussed in this thesis is confined to Shanghai, and the period of the 1980s, I use “avant-garde art” as the English term specifically here to emphasise the transition from modern to contemporary art in Shanghai in this period. This term is defined further in this Introduction under the heading “The term avant-garde art.”

² This period will be referred to as “the 1980s” hereafter in this thesis.

³ Individualism is defined and discussed in greater detail later in this Introduction.

1980s.⁴ I argue that experimental art production in the avant-garde art scene of the early 1980s in Shanghai was the precursor for the later nation-wide art movement ('85 美术新潮 ['85 Art New Wave movement] or '85 美术运动 ['85 Movement]) in China in the mid 1980s. I demonstrate in this thesis that these significant factors related to avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s have been overlooked in the national and international discourse on contemporary Chinese art. The lack of in-depth study on this subject has resulted in an inadequate representation of Shanghai avant-garde art of the 1980s in the historiography of contemporary Chinese art.

While in recent years art historians and critics, both in China and internationally, have increasingly been interested in exploring contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s,⁵ from my observations and my research findings, avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s has, nevertheless, been neglected in that discourse. Not until very recently has this subject drawn attention from historians and critics. It still, however, lacks in-depth scholarly study. This thesis is intended to fill this lacuna in the narratives of China's contemporary art. It is based on empirical evidence from my personal experiences as a practising artist in Shanghai during this period, my long-term friendship with selected pivotal artists and art administrators and writers, extensive interviews undertaken for this project and my research into primary and secondary source material related to that decade. In this thesis, Shanghai

⁴ See in-depth discussion in Chapter 1 the section under the subheading "National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."

⁵ There have been a number of important studies on Chinese contemporary art and culture published since the early 1980s. These are detailed in the bibliography of this thesis. Earlier critical publications include: John Minford and Geremie R. Barmé, eds., *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (Hong Kong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1986); Gao Minglu 高名潞, et al., *Chinese Contemporary Art History* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House 1991); Lü Peng, Yi Dan, 《中国现代艺术史, 1979-1989》[*A History of Chinese Contemporary Art, 1979-1989*] (Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Publishing House, 1992); Li Xianting 栗宪庭, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," in the exhibition catalogue *China's New Art Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993); Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics of the People's Republic of China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998); Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University, 2008) [the revised edition from Gao Minglu, et al., *Chinese Contemporary Art History* vol.01 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House 1991)]; Gao Minglu, *'85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources* vol. 02 (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University, 2008); Wu Hung 巫鸿, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), the revised edition of Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the end of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago Press, 2005). Critical exhibition catalogues and new research projects have brought to light new material in recent years, for example: Asia Art Archive (AAA) project, "Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990" (2006). Later publications in the last decade have introduced new research perspectives into the discourse and some of these key studies are discussed in Chapter 1 and in further chapters throughout the thesis and are also listed in the bibliography of this thesis.

avant-garde art will be examined through case studies of the Shanghai Art Museum and the work of six major artists. I also undertake an analysis of selected art exhibitions held in Shanghai in the 1980s. In my analysis I draw attention to the fact that a number of artistic experimentations, key exhibitions and art events occurred in Shanghai in advance of similar events in other places in China, even if only by a few months. One may pose the question as to the significance of this time difference. I argue that within a specific context in China of rapid political, social and economic change in the late 1970s and the 1980s those seemingly small differences in timing redefine and challenge previously assigned assumptions regarding contemporary art in China in the 1980s. Those events have inseparable links to the history and the cultural milieu of Shanghai, as well as revealing the level of risk-taking by individuals who were involved in avant-garde art activities in Shanghai at the time.

Commentators in China have often characterised the Shanghai art scene and how the artistic community in that city functioned in terms of art production and the artists' way of living by using the words "individual" (个体), "individuality" (个体性), and "selfness" (自我).⁶ Li Shan 李山, a key Shanghai avant-garde artist, remarked that the Shanghai art scene of the 1980s required "detailed individual examination, unlike art events or artist groups in other places and cities that clearly display a collective style, often with a manifesto. [...]"⁷ In this thesis I highlight the attribute of individualism displayed by avant-garde artists in Shanghai in the 1980s, and use the term "the spirit of individualism" to refer to this distinctiveness.⁸ This

⁶ See Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement*, (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University, 2008), pp.204-205, 216; Zhang Ying, "Interview: Fei Dawei," *ArtWorld* 225 (2008). <http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5ODcxOTg1Mw==&mid=402329275&idx=1&sn=3021c2c0ec2bd15fabaf5edb2fd77d05&scene=0#wechat_redirect>, viewed 10 January 2016. This characteristic reflected in key literature on avant-garde art of the 1980s in China will be explored in detail in Chapter 1 under the heading of "National discourse and local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."

⁷ Li Shan 李山, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, (Shanghai: October 2011). See further discussion on Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the 1980s in Chapter 4 under the subheading "The role in '85 Art New Wave movement: events and art exhibitions."

⁸ The official Chinese Xinhua Dictionary (online) defines the 个人主义 [individualism] as: 认为社会的主要目的是促进个人福利、道德规则的主要目的是发展个性的学说；亦指受此种学说指导的行为或实践，认为在行为的决定方面，个人本身的利益应该高于一切的道德学说或原则；道德的自私自利。 [(individualism) is a doctrine holding that the main purpose of society is to promote individual welfare, and that the main purpose of moral norms is to promote individuality; it also refers to action or practices guided by this doctrine, holding that as regards decisions to act, the interests of the individual should be superior to all moral doctrines or principles; moral selfishness.] (*Online Chinese Dictionary* <<http://xh.5156edu.com/html3/2697.html>>, viewed 25 November 2016. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. According to the *Online Oxford Dictionaries*, the definition of "individualism" is: "the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant; Self-centred feeling or conduct, egoism; a social theory favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control." (*Online Oxford Dictionaries* <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/individualism?q=individualism+>>, viewed 05 June 2016). In the context of Chinese modern and

concept has a history in China's intellectual life which I discuss later in this Introduction. Avant-garde artists in Shanghai, I argue, took up and maintained a stance of individualism to resist the ethos of collectivism, which characterised art movements elsewhere in China in the 1980s.⁹ I examine in this thesis the resistance to forming collective groups with manifestos of shared values in local Shanghai avant-garde art circles which I suggest were instead defined by less formal networks and collaborations. While individualism may exist in art activities elsewhere in China, my research findings demonstrate that it became in effect a transformative force and a conspicuous feature of the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the 1980s. I argue that individual artists and art administrators in Shanghai engaged in artistic experimentation and art activities at this time which were crucial in the development of contemporary art in Shanghai and in mainland China in a time of rapid change. The spirit of individualism together with the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism was the impetus for their individual artistic expressions and attitudes. Furthermore, critical art institutions under the influence of individual administrators who shared the same values as the avant-garde artists played a fundamental role in creating the Shanghai art scene in the 1980s.

The spirit of individualism in Shanghai avant-garde art, I contend, has been overlooked in writings about art in China in the 1980s by art historians and critics, and works of the Shanghai avant-garde artists have often been discounted because of theoretical agendas or other criteria in the narratives of contemporary Chinese art in China up to the present day. The related issue of the evaluation of early twentieth-century Chinese modern art history has been distorted by the political agendas of the Communist Party throughout the 1950s,

contemporary art in this thesis I will define individualism based on the definition from *Online Oxford Dictionaries*, that is freedom of individuals pursuing ideas and art expression in contrast to the prevailing tendency of a collectivism ethos. I will discuss this further in this Introduction in particular under the subheading "The spirit of individualism in the Chinese modern and contemporary art context."

⁹ The official Chinese Xinhua Dictionary (online) defines the 集体主义 [collectivism] as: 一切从集体出发, 把集体利益放在个人利益之上的思想, 是社会主义、共产主义的基本精神。[That everything proceeds from the collective, and that the interest of collective is placed above that of the individual, is the basic spirit of socialism and communism.] (*Online Chinese Dictionary* <<http://xh.5156edu.com/html5/267529.html>>, viewed 25 November 2016. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. The definition of "collectivism" in *Online Oxford Dictionaries* states: "the practice or principle of giving a group priority over each individual in it; the ownership of land and the means of production by the people or the state, as a political principle or system." (*Online Oxford Dictionaries* <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/collectivism?q=collectivism+>>, viewed 05 June 2016). Based on this definition in the context of Chinese modern and contemporary art, the term collectivism in this thesis refers to collective efforts of forming artists' groups to achieve socio-political changes through art. The idea of collectivism together with Marxism and Communist ideology had been thoroughly incorporated into the official art doctrine during the Mao era. However, its influence was also reflected in avant-garde art discourse in the 1980s. Further discussions are in "The spirit of individualism in the Chinese modern and contemporary art context" in the Introduction and "National discourse and local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s" in Chapter 1.

60s, and 70s, and the focus of the discourse shifted in those years from individualism in art to the individual's role in terms of social and political responsibilities. Thus, this thesis aims to contribute original knowledge to the historiography of contemporary Chinese art.

The Term Avant-Garde Art

The term “avant-garde art” was adopted by Chinese artists and art critics in the 1980s as the English translation from the Chinese term Qianwei Yishuz 前卫艺术 that was most commonly used in China to represent art practices and art expressions opposed to official and academic art.¹⁰ It emerged from a specific socio-political situation with clear aesthetic and philosophic associations and temporal socio-cultural ramifications. Though the origin of the term “avant-garde” was a construct of European modernity it was appropriated by artists and art critics in China to distinguish the art and practices outside official art and academic art paradigms in the contemporary Chinese art context in the 1980s.¹¹

¹⁰ See footnote 1 for detail. The widely used term “Qianwei 前卫” in contemporary art discourse in the 1980s was also discussed by Geremie R. Barmé. See in Geremie R. Barmé, “Critics now chip away at China’s concrete eyesores,” *Far East Economic Review* (Nov17, 1988): 54-56, at p.56. The term “Qianwei Yishu” translated as “avant-garde art” frequently appeared in newspapers and magazines to denote avant-garde in Western art after 1976. As I have observed throughout the 1980s, some artists in Shanghai associated themselves and characterised their art practice as Qianwei Yishu as early as the beginning of the 1980s, for example, Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun 张健君 whose art is discussed in the case studies of this thesis. It is difficult to pinpoint which scholar or article and the earliest date the term Qianwei Yishu was used as referring to art and practice outside of official and academic art in China. My observation has been confirmed by Li Xianting 栗宪庭, a prominent art critic in China since late 1970s, from his research in his article about the terms of “avant-garde art,” “modern art,” and “contemporary art” in China context. He could not identify any individual who was the first to “used the concept of avant-garde” [使用前卫这个概念] in Chinese modern art discourse. He further stated: “But as a concept, as far as I know, it appeared with the contemporary Chinese art in the late 1970s and was widely used in the “’85 New Wave Art” of the 1980s, and it was used in the meaning of innovation.” [但作为一个概念, 据我所知, 它和中国当代艺术一起于 70 年代末出现的, 并在 80 年代的“’85 美术新潮”中广泛使用, 而且是从创新这个含义上使用的。] See Li Xianting, “About Avant-garde Art,” [关于前卫艺术] *Huanghe* 黄河 vol.77 no.1 (1999): 149-152, at 149.

¹¹ In the course of my research and analysis in this thesis, I argue avant-garde artists were catalysts for change in art activities in the 1980s. Art critics in China often used the term of “avant-garde art” as referring to Western art in public spheres though were cautious to name Chinese individuals or groups as “avant-garde artists” because of political implications which might affect the artist and the art groups. This was certainly the case in the first half of the 1980s and possibly a reason the term Xiandai Yishu 现代艺术 [English translation “modern art”] was used commonly in public discourse; however this also caused confusion in differentiating Qianwei Yishu [avant-garde art], *Xiandai yishu* [modern art]. The term Dangdai Yishu 当代艺术 [English translation “contemporary art”] was commonly used in the 1990s by Chinese art critics instead of the two previous terms used in the 1980s. The example of the well-known “China/Avant-garde Art Exhibition” in 1989 was an English translation. Its original name in Chinese was the “中国现代艺术展” [a literal translation is: China Modern Art Exhibition].

The general Western notion of “avant-garde art” has been articulated within specific theoretical frameworks by scholars and art historians in modern and contemporary discourses. For example, in his major work *Modernism’s History: A study in twentieth century art and ideas*, Bernard Smith challenged the original nineteenth-century concept of “avant-garde” within the Western art paradigm of modernism by arguing for the consideration of renaissance, mannerist and baroque art as avant-garde art.¹² In a cross-cultural context, John Clark identifies the avant-garde by examining modernity in Asian art cultures, and states: “Where one finds all the panoply of instruments of an art establishment, there is room often for a counter-establishment, that is, an establishment in waiting, and also an avant-garde.” Clark describes this “tripartite relation” an avant-garde that is not only “a copy of the relations which existed in Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” but also “a function of the critical position of modern art with regard to both reinterpretations of traditional form and technique and to different styles of Euramerican art” that find “favour with the new or newly restructured ruling élite.”¹³ Clark further explained:

Here it becomes apparent that the avant-garde often identified with the introduction of styles which were only recently avant-garde in Euramerica, continually functions to undercut established positions in both the discourses of works and interpretation, and of artists and critics associated with them.

The avant-garde does so by, broadly speaking, taking one of two routes. It has a continual and effectively contemporary access to “new” foreign art forms. It thus maintains that access to discourses of works and interpretation which preserve its status in the internal art world, namely privileges its authority as an interpreter. This is particularly important because one may define modernity as the ability to discriminate and mobilize new knowledge, and in art forms this “newness” is often found in an “other” defining external world. Also, since “newness” is often equivalent to “other,” the ability to mobilize knowledge about the outside world is a critical technique in the discourse of interpretation which defines what it is to be modern within the culture.¹⁴

In a political and historical context where countries like China and the former Soviet Union were under totalitarian regimes, David Elliott expounded the notion and condition of the avant-garde in the catalogue of the early major international touring exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in Europe titled *China Avant-Garde* in 1993:

¹² Bernard Smith, *Modernism’s History: A study in twentieth century art and ideas* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1998), pp.20-22.

¹³ John Clark, “Open and Closed Discourse of Modernity in Asian Art,” *Modernity in Asian Art* (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993), p.11.

¹⁴ Clark, “Open and Closed Discourse of Modernity in Asian Art,” pp.11-12.

The notion of an avant-garde, which coalesced in Europe at the end of last century, is rooted in the idea of social and cultural opposition for progressive ends – it disappeared from western art in the 1970s. In China after the Communist Liberation in 1949, as in the Soviet Union after the Stalinist Cultural Revolution of 1928 to 1932, an avant-garde could no longer officially exist for the simple reason that, as the country was already governed by the proletariat, any opposition would be reactionary.¹⁵

From the art in this exhibition, Elliott explicated further that there were “two broad tendencies, which may both be identified as avant-garde.” Those two broad tendencies were the “innovation — the search for new forms and languages” and the “ironical view of the ideologies and myths of the dominant culture by subverting its images.” Those tendencies were reminiscent of the works of Koma and Melamid, Ilya Kabakov and Erik Bulatov from the Sots Art Movement in Russia in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁶

From the 1990s, art writers both in China and overseas have used various terms to define contemporary Chinese art in the period of the 1980s,¹⁷ such as: “avant-garde art” (as

¹⁵ David Elliott, et al., “Introduction,” *China Avant-garde* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1993), p.7.

¹⁶ Elliott, *China Avant-garde*, p.7.

¹⁷ How to define the starting point for contemporary art in China and what type of art could be called contemporary Chinese art has been the subject of contentious debates in China since the 1990s. In this thesis, I will adopt the views on a temporal defining of “contemporary” in China put forward by prominent art critic Li Xianting in China, and an international scholar on Chinese art and culture, Claire Roberts. Li in an article defining the terms of “avant-garde art,” “modern art,” and “contemporary art” in the context of China, commented: “中国的当代艺术从 70 年代末开始, 至今已有 20 年的历史。 [Contemporary Chinese art emerged from the end of the 1970s and now has a history of 20 years].” See Li Xianting, “About Avant-garde Art” [关于前卫艺术] *Huanghe 黄河* vol.77 no.1 (1999): pp.149-152. In her essay for the *Go Figure* exhibition catalogue, Roberts stated: “The contemporary period in China begins in 1976 with the deaths of China’s paramount leaders: Premier Zhou Enlai (8 January) and President Mao Zedong (9 September), and the concomitant birth of a fledgling people’s democracy movement.” See Claire Roberts, “Go Figure, Contemporary Chinese Portraiture,” *Go Figure: Contemporary Chinese Portraiture* (Canberra: National Portrait Gallery and Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2012), p.10. Based on Roberts’ definition, this thesis uses the terms “contemporary art” or “contemporary Chinese art” to denote the art practices and the artistic expressions that are outside of the official art dictum and academic art in a period starting from post Cultural Revolution in 1976 including the term Qianwei Yishu/Avant-garde art from the 1980s period.

mentioned above), unofficial art (非官方艺术);¹⁸ and experimental art (实验艺术).¹⁹ In the seminal publication on the '85 Art Movement, Gao Minglu 高名潞 and his co-authors took an historical approach by including all these terms and defined them as "Chinese Modern Art" (中国现代艺术).²⁰ A similar approach was adopted by Lü Peng 吕澎 in his two important publications related to this period.²¹

Since the discourse of art and art production discussed in this thesis is confined to Shanghai and to the period of the 1980s, I use "avant-garde art" as an approximate English translation for the Chinese term Qianwei Yishu specifically here to emphasise the transition from modern to contemporary art in Shanghai in this period, and to broadly denote all definitions mentioned above.²²

The Spirit of Individualism in the Chinese Modern and Contemporary Art Context

Above, I put forward the argument that the spirit of individualism was the essence of avant-garde art in Shanghai and that it represented a distinctive local voice in contrast to the prevailing collectivist ethos in China's contemporary art scene in the 1980s. This spirit of individualism was derived, I maintain, both from the legacy of early twentieth-century modernist art in Shanghai and fresh new philosophical ideas from the West²³ that flowed

¹⁸ See in Chang Tsong-zung Johnson 张颂仁, "Into the Nineties," in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), i-vii; also see in Hou Hanru 侯瀚如, "Towards an 'Unofficial Art'," in *On The Mid-Ground*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Hwei (Hong Kong: timezone 8, 2002), p.24; Kuiyi Shen, Julia Frances Andrews, *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985* (New York: New York China Institute Gallery, China Institute, 2011). See an in-depth discussion on "unofficial" art and exhibitions in Chapter 1 under the subheading "The Critical Early Unofficial Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s," and in Chapter 2 under the subheading "Political and Bureaucratic Structures in the 1980s."

¹⁹ See in Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), pp.13-16. I use the word "experiment" or "experimental" to describe the art practices of selected artists in this thesis as well as other Shanghai artists, to emphasise the radical and innovative nature of their practice, and the risks taken in pursuing their art, and especially the political environment at that time in China.

²⁰ See in Gao Minglu et al., "Second Edition Forward" and "Chapter 7 Modern Art and Culture," in *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University, 2008), p.13, pp.443-503.

²¹ See in Yi Dan 易丹 and Lü Peng 吕澎, *Chinese Modern Art History: 1979-1989* (Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Publishing House, 1990); and Lü Peng, "Form Art, 'Start' Event and Modernism," in *A History of Art in Twentieth-Century China* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2006), pp.725-753.

²² See footnote 1 for the definition.

²³ In this thesis, I adopt Shu-mei Shih's definition of the term "West" referring not only to the nations of Europe and North America, but also as a symbolic construct which Shih referred to as the "definition by the Indian Subaltern Studies group 'as an imaginary though powerful entity created by a historical process that authorised it as the home of Reason, Progress, and Modernity,' a construct distributed and universalised by imperialism

into China following the opening up of China from the early 1980's. In examining this concept, I have made use of a number of essential sources, including interviews with key figures from the 1980s whose views are discussed in the case study chapters. During my research I identified a little-known source — Shanghai artist Chen Zhen's 陈箴 essay "Individual Consciousness and Group Consciousness" published in the underground art magazine *Visual Art* in 1987 — which is an especially important primary source for my analysis of ideas on individualism held by intellectuals in the Shanghai avant-garde art scene.²⁴ (Figure 1.)

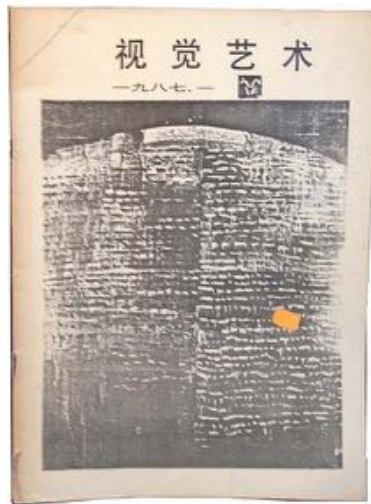


Figure 1. *Visual Art* 《视觉艺术》. Self-published by Horn Art Research Association, *Visual Art* editorial committee, Shanghai, 1987.

The idea of modernity was introduced into China as early as the late nineteenth century. It has been associated with the concepts of liberalism, existentialism, and modernism in general and has been articulated by Chinese modern thinkers in the Chinese socio-political and cultural context as expressing the desire for China's modernisation. It was manifested in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and was encompassed by the political philosophy of *Three Principles of the People* (*Nationalism, Democracy, Livelihood of the People*) [三民主义：民族，民权，民生] developed by Sun Yat-sen in the Republican Revolution era.²⁵ The legacy of early twentieth-century modernist

and nationalism." See Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-colonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp.1-2.

²⁴ Chen Zhen 陈箴, "Individual Consciousness and Group Consciousness" ("个体意识与群体意识"), in *Visual Art* (Shanghai: Self-published by Horn Art Research Association, *Visual Art* editorial committee, 1987): 32-33. See my in-depth discussion on Chen Zhen's critique in Chapter 6 under the subheading "Chen Zhen."

²⁵ See Lin Jiayou, 《孙中山与辛亥革命史研究的新审视》[Sun Yat-sen and the New Research on the History of 1911 Revolution] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Education Publishing House, 2007.) Sun Yat-sen (1866-1924) was

art existed elsewhere in China, especially in major cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Hangzhou, and Suzhou, but Shanghai remained the dominant force. This is because Shanghai was the centre of modernist art activities and movements, as well as the largest city in China in the 1920s, and a major political and cultural hub until the 1940s. The international presence and its influences on daily life in Shanghai became much more evident after Shanghai was opened to foreign trade under the terms of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 which resulted in it becoming a major port city. The increasing population of foreigners in Shanghai settled in the foreign concessions living side by side with local residents in premier residential and retail districts, a condition described by historians as semi-colonial. The concessions officially ended in 1943 during the war against Japan.²⁶ Its modern history has endowed the city with a unique social and political environment so that it reacted to new ideas from the West more receptively than other cities in China. In this thesis I advance the argument that China's modernisation in the early twentieth century shaped both Shanghai's modern art and the later avant-garde art that emerged in Shanghai in the 1980s. This legacy of early twentieth-century modernism, as well as the spirit of individualism in Shanghai described above, I contend, were the major contributing factors that led some art activities and events to occur in Shanghai before they did elsewhere in China.

The period of avant-garde art in Shanghai discussed in this thesis covers the years 1979 to 1989,²⁷ and is marked by two major political events: the end of the Cultural Revolution in

the first provisional president of the Republic of China (1911) at the end of the Qing Dynasty and established the "Three People's Principles" or "San-min Doctrine" – Democracy, Nationalism and People's Livelihood. Marxism was introduced into China's modernity construct by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and developed under Mao's political ideology and became the Party's doctrine after the CCP came to power in 1949. There are a large number of studies on China's modernity, for examples, See Zou Shipeng, "马克思主义中国化与中国现代性的构建," ["Sinicization of Marxism and the Construction of Chinese Modernity"] in *Journal of Chinese Social Sciences* 1 (2005):16-21; Liu Xiaohong, "个人观转型：中国现代性研究中的一个重要问题," ["The Transformation of Individual Outlook: An Important Issue in the Study of Chinese Modernity"] *Journal of East China Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 36.6 (2004): 35-41.

²⁶ Between 1910 and 1927 Shanghai's population doubled from 1.289 to 2.641 million and doubled again to 5.5 million by 1949. In 1930 Shanghai's foreign community was 152,000 representing around 5 % of the total population. <<http://www.shtong.gov.cn/Newsite/node2/node2247/node4564/index.html>>, viewed 27 March 2015; <<https://archive.shine.cn/feature/art-and-culture/Shanghai-in-1930s-A-melting-pot-of-history-and-culture/shdaily.shtml>>, viewed 10 February 2017. For further details on the semi-colonial and urban history of Shanghai, see Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*, trans. Janet Lloyd. Published in French under the title, (*Histoire de Shanghai, Librairie Arthème Fayard* (2002) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.); Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*.

²⁷ While the focus of this thesis covers the period 1979 to 1989 there will be time overlaps relating to political, social, and cultural matters in China during this period.

1976, and the June Fourth incident in 1989.²⁸ In this period, China was driven by the slogan Four Modernizations²⁹ launched in 1978 that was followed by the implementation of what was widely known as the “reform and opening-up” (改革开放) policy.³⁰ The impact of these events allowed Western modern philosophies and contemporary art theories to become accessible to artists and art critics in China. The atmosphere of greater political relaxation generated enthusiasm in revitalising China’s modernity in all sectors of the country. The vitality and scale of cultural discussions reached a new height by the middle of the 1980s as a nationwide phenomenon described by many as Cultural Fever (文化热).³¹ The subject matter of cultural debates related to East and West, tradition and modernisation during the Cultural Fever period has been seen as the greatest movement of cultural introspection since the May Fourth Movement (五四运动),³² and as the revival of China’s discussions on modernity from the point where those debates had been disrupted first by wars through the 1930s and 1940s,³³ and by political ideology following the Communist Party’s ascent to power in 1949. Shanghai, the former protagonist of modernity was portrayed by the Communist regime after 1949 as the evil model of decadent capitalism and the bourgeoisie in China and, in a city once the centre of debates on modernisation, modernist art went underground in the 1950s, 60s, and early half of the 1970s.

²⁸ The June Fourth incident [六.四事件] is a common reference in Chinese for what took place in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 4 June 1989. This “incident” occurred when the government enforced martial law on the student-led demonstrators late on the night of 3 June and in full force on 4 June by deploying troops to clear the Square resulting in large casualties. It became known internationally as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. (See a discussion of the event in Geremie R. Barmé and Linda Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times Books, 1992).

²⁹ Four Modernizations [四个现代化] comprised agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology. The slogan was officially launched by Deng Xiaoping at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978 and marked the beginning of the reform era.

³⁰ See related discussion of this policy in Chapter 1, under the subheading “National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s.”

³¹ Some political relaxations were also accompanied by periodical political campaigns to sustain the legitimacy of the regime, such as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (1983) and the Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalisation (1987).

³² The May Fourth Movement was a patriotic, political, and cultural movement that was sparked by the students in Beijing and supported by the leading intellectuals protesting on May 4, 1919 against the Treaty drawn up at the Paris Peace Conference (known as the Treaty of Versailles) giving rights over the Chinese province of Shandong to Imperial Japan. Further discussion on the May Fourth Movement in relation to the New Culture Movement is included in the following section under the subheading “New Culture Movement.”

³³ These were the war against the Japanese invasion (July 1937 – August 1945) and the civil war between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party (what the Communist Party called the “Liberation War” [解放战争] (August 1945 – September 1949).

In a comprehensive book on Shanghai's modern history, Marie-Claire Bergère described the nuances of the political relationship between Shanghai and the central government in Beijing during the Mao era:

Contrary to some predictions, Shanghai did not destroy Communism but was obliged to submit to it. But neither did Communism destroy Shanghai; it simply changed it. In a setting that remained intact, it engendered a new economy and a new society. Yet the minute controls were relaxed, as happened during the periodic clashes between rival factions at the top, certain features of the social activism characteristic of the old Shanghai resurfaced.³⁴

After the Cultural Revolution the political and social situation and sanctions imposed by the central government had eased. Books and reproductions of Western modernist art which had been underground for many years and available only in private viewing, were publicly accessible and in demand. Ideas on modernity and modernism could now be discussed and debated. Connections with modernist art during the 1980s will be examined from the perspectives of individual experiences through the artist case studies in this thesis. In fact, the process of the movement of cultural introspection after the end of the Cultural Revolution effectively reinstated the continuing legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai in relation to the progression of modernisation in China. The debates on modernity that occurred from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s have had far-reaching effects in the continuous unfolding story of China's socio-political and cultural transformation and affected art in 1980s Shanghai, and across China, in critical ways.

Artists in Shanghai had experienced the strong influence of individualism in art since the debates of the early twentieth century. This individualism was reflected, as argued in this thesis, by avant-garde artists in Shanghai in the 1980s upholding the desire to pursue individual artistic expression. This aspect will be investigated through the case studies of selected artists. I will demonstrate that from the beginning of the 1980s this "individual" characteristic of avant-garde artists in Shanghai became more pronounced, and in distancing themselves from the prevailing collectivist ethos in avant-garde activities in China more generally, the artists encountered official reactions including criticism of their work. The position taken by the Shanghai avant-garde artists discussed in this thesis also encompassed resistance to any collective form of art movement that recalled the Communist revolutionary form of the collectivism of the recent past and by those artists retaining individual expression in their artistic experimentations. Without blindly following the West, they adopted Western modern and post-modern art practices and combined intellectual

³⁴ Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*, p.367.

studies in traditional Eastern philosophies with Western modern or postmodern philosophies and theories. In China's socio-political specificity, investigation of the essence of "individual" characteristics probes the contentious political issue of individualism in the progression of Chinese modernity. In the modern Chinese cultural sphere, individualism and modernism in art have been rejected by left-wing thinkers since the 1920s and have been continuously repudiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the establishment of the New China in 1949. These concepts have been either denounced or forbidden throughout the 1950s, 60s and early 70s. Modernist art has finally found its public place in China, but individualism has continued to be marginalised until the present day.

Although this thesis is not a study of politics, however, the marginalisation of individualism in China is closely related to artists and art practice and to the changes in avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s and is summarised in my analysis of the literature on the contemporary Chinese art discourse in Chapter 1 under the subheading "National discourse and local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s" as well as incorporated throughout the analysis in this thesis and especially as part of my case studies.

The socio-political and cultural changes discussed above have affected art historiography as modern Chinese art history up to 1949 had been rarely touched upon by international art historians until the 1970s.³⁵ The important exception is British art historian Michael Sullivan who made a significant contribution in this field with his pioneering work *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* published in 1959.³⁶ It was not until the 1980s that a large body of writing on this subject was produced both in China and internationally.³⁷ It is

³⁵ See Michael Sullivan, "Speech at the Beijing University" in *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Chinese edition) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2013), p.16.

³⁶ Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1959). In 1996, Sullivan compiled his 65 years of art collections, personal letters and other historical materials of interactions with Chinese artists and writers for a further publication *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* in a time span from the early twentieth century to the early 1990s, published in 1996. (See Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.) This publication has been translated into Chinese in two volumes and published in China by the Shanghai People's Publishing House in 2012.

³⁷ Among the volume of writings on early twentieth-century modern Chinese art since the 1980s, the exemplary publication *Twentieth Century Chinese Fine Art Anthology* edited by Lang Shaojun 郎绍君 and Shui Tianzhong 水天中, provides rich historical materials on important writings from China over this period. (See Lang Shaojun, Shui Tianzhong, ed., 《二十世纪中国美术文选》 [*Twentieth Century Chinese Fine Art Anthology*], vol. 1&2, (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 1996). Similarly, international scholars have published valuable material including: Jerome Silbergeld and Gong Jisui, *Contradictions: Artistic Life, the Socialist State, and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng (Jackson School Publications in International Studies)* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1993); Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*; Kuiyi Shen, "The Modernist Woodcut Movement in 1930s China," *Shanghai Modern 1919-1945* (Munich: Hatje Cantz, 2004); Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

beyond the scope of this thesis to review in detail the span of China's modern history. To explore the crucial nexus of the modernist legacy and the spirit of individualism in avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s, and to fulfil the research objectives of the thesis by examining the historical context, my focus in the following two sections of the Introduction will be on two critical historic movements, the New Culture Movement and the Modernist Art Movement. This examination will provide clarity in relation to 'the spirit of individualism' within the Chinese socio-political context.

New Culture Movement

The notion of the spirit of individualism I argue is rooted in the ideas of liberalism and science that derive from the New Culture Movement (新文化运动) in China in the early twentieth century. The New Culture Movement starting date is marked by the establishment of *La Jeunesse* 《新青年》, a left-wing magazine by Chen Duxiou 陈独秀 in Shanghai on 15 September 1915.³⁸ (Figure 2.) The New Culture Movement erupted at the crucial historical moment of the collapse of the Qing Dynasty marking the end of thousands of years of imperial rule, and the introduction of Euro-American ideas of modernity into China. Quite often these ideas of modernity came to China via Japan.³⁹ It called for the establishment of a



Figure 2. *La Jeunesse* 《新青年》 magazine (1915).

³⁸ Qin Hui 秦晖, "新文化运动的主调及所谓被“压倒”问题: 新文化运动百年反思 [The Main Tune of the New Culture Movement and the so-called "Overwhelming" Problem: Reflections on the New Culture Movement in the Past 100 Years," in 探索与争鸣 [Exploration and Free Views] No.9 and No.10 (2015): 72-81, 74-82.

³⁹ The role of Japan in China's modernisation in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century has been well studied by scholars around the world. In her seminal book *The Lure of the Modern*, Shu-mei Shih, a scholar of modernist literature in China, dedicated a lengthy section to "Japanese Modernism and China" to explicate this complicated relationship. She argued that Japan played "the prominent role" as "the mediating

new Chinese culture through the adoption of Western ideas of democracy and science guided by concepts of individual liberty, a scientific spirit of inquiry, and a pragmatic approach to the nation's problems. As noted in footnote 32, the leading intellectuals in this movement supported the students in Beijing who were protesting on 4 May 1919 against the Treaty drawn up at the Paris Peace Conference (also known as the Treaty of Versailles) giving rights over the Chinese province of Shandong to Imperial Japan. This became known as the May Fourth Movement. The May Fourth Movement transformed into a political and patriotic movement that created different views within the leadership group. Two central figures in the group, Chen Duxiu, the faculty dean of Peking University and a co-founder of the CCP, and Li Dazhao 李大钊, the head of the library at Peking University and a co-founder of the CCP, took a radical political view and urged more political actions. Younger followers, including Mao Zedong, joined with Chen and Li in forming the CCP. These two movements later have been referred to as the "May Fourth Spirit" in the Chinese Communist Party's rhetoric about revolutionary history since the 1940s defined by Mao's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* in 1942.⁴⁰

During the New Culture Movement, the issue of individualism was part of the central debates over political, social and cultural ideas. The debates were often entangled with the notions of individual (citizen) and nation (nationalism and patriotism) due to the historical background of a number of unfair treaties imposed by foreign powers during the late Qing Dynasty and the continuing Japanese aggression toward China. In a journal article on the question of the patriotism of the May Fourth Movement, Xu Jilin 许纪霖, a Shanghai-based scholar of modern Chinese history, illustrated the most significant ideas in the discussions during the New Culture Movement such as the concepts of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, individualism, May Fourth patriotism, etc. On the issue of individualism, Xu stated:

transmitter of Western culture and a potent force in the formation of Chinese modernism" that formed the "triangular relationship" and was "indicative of the political and cultural condition of China under multiple domination from Euro-American and Japanese imperialisms, which in turn problematizes the China/West binary model privileged in comparative culture studies." See Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*, pp.3, 16-40. Other scholars such as Leo Ou-fan Lee, Kuiyi Shen, and Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker have also provided valuable insights in their publications. See Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, "Shanghai Modern," *Shanghai Modern 1919-1945* (Munich: Hatje Cantz, 2004); Kuiyi Shen, "The Japanese Impact on the Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Field — a Case Study of Teng Gu and Fu Baoshi," *The Role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art* ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ Mao Zedong's "Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (referred to hereafter as Yan'an Talks) held in the Communist-controlled northern city of Yan'an as part of the significant Party event of the Yan'an Rectification Movement 延安整风运动 in 1942. The main points of the Yan'an Talks were that all art should reflect the life of the working class as the audience, and that art should serve politics especially the advancement of socialism.

In contrast to the fanaticism of the late-Qing and early Republic periods, from 1915 onward, as a result of the New Cultural Movement, an age of individualism unfolded. Although the concept of the individual freighted with modern connotations was born along with that of the nation during the last years of the Qing dynasty, the late-Qing conceptualization of the individual was more, it implied that a citizen's identity merged with that of the nation. By the time of the New Culture Movement, however, a concept of the individual in contradistinction to the nation – even at odds with it – appeared. And the moment that the interests of the individual and the nation diverged, with the former becoming a notion of a separate, self-aware entity with its own internally generated sense of importance, the idea of the nation as an organism lost its basis of existence, if the citizens and the nation were no longer part of an indivisible organism, then the relationship between the two became one of ends and means.⁴¹

The concept of individualism in China was entangled with the notion of nation or patriotism in the early decades of the twentieth century, and later confronted and was opposed by the Communist ideology. However, the aspiration of pursuing liberal ideas and science to create a modern Chinese society was widespread and was incorporated into various political movements and political groups or parties throughout the first half of the twentieth century. During this New Culture Movement period, the embrace of Western art and art practice in order to develop a new art in China was frequently raised in discussions, forming an approach that was described as the “Western Style Painting Movement” (洋画运动).⁴² Discussion mainly centered on the necessity to reform and enrich traditional Chinese art by embracing scientifically based Western art practices and modern ideas as propounded by the Chinese philosophers and reformists such as Kang Youwei 康有为 and Liang Qichao 梁启超, and later Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, Hu Shi 胡适 and Chen Duxiu.⁴³ The discussions turned into heated debates between the reformists and conservatives such as that evoked by the article “Fine Art Revolution” (美术革命) by Chen Duxiu, a radical left intellectual and one of the leading figures for the May Fourth students' movement. It was published in the *La Jeunesse* magazine (No.1, Vol.6) in 1918 in Shanghai and proposed to

⁴¹ Xu Jilin 许纪霖, “Historical Memories of May Fourth: Patriotism, but of what kind?” trans. Duncan M. Campbell, in *China Heritage Quarterly*, 17 (March 2009), <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=017_mayfourthmemories.inc&issue=017>, viewed 10 December 2015.

⁴² The term Yanghua Yundong 洋画运动 (Western Style Painting Movement) was coined by the artist and writer Chen Baoyi 陈抱一 in his long article in 1942. See: Chen Baoyi, 《洋画运动过程略记》 [A Brief History of Western Style Painting Movement], in 《上海艺术月刊》 [*Shanghai Art Monthly*] vol.5.12 (1942).

⁴³ Among those major figures, Cai Yuanpei is recognised as a critical proponent of art education and the founding figure for China's modern education by reforming the system of traditional education and to integrate Chinese and Western educational ideas. He served briefly as the provisional Minister of Education of the Republic (1912), President of Peking University (1917), and first President of the Academia Sinica (1928). Cai spent many years in France and in Germany.

“subvert the orthodox school of Chinese paintings” [革王画的命] by using a Western realist art spirit to improve Chinese paintings.⁴⁴

A phenomenon running parallel with the “Western Style Painting Movement” was the “Shanghai School”⁴⁵ (Haipai 海派) painting in a traditional Chinese art form. It emerged in Shanghai in response to the industrialisation, urbanisation, and commercial needs in the period of the late Qing Dynasty (1900-1912) and the early Republican era (1912-1916). The leading figures such as Zhao Zhiqian 赵之谦, Ren Bonian 任伯年, Wu Changshuo 吴昌硕, and Xu Gu 虚谷, with their individual styles broke away from the literati painting tradition in making traditional Chinese paintings appreciated by all levels of people and to meet art market demands by practically introducing Western painting techniques.⁴⁶ The phrase Haipai has been used broadly in China at a later date to describe people or things from Shanghai in the sense of non-traditional, modern, and fashionable.

The literary and intellectual activities related to these movements were largely concentrated in the two major cities, Beijing and Shanghai, in the New Culture Movement period. The relatively open and free cultural environment in the Republican era contributed to the adoption of modernist ideas not only in literature, but also in visual art. The general view among scholars, both in China and internationally, is that key factors informed these debates and the transformation of art in China in the early twentieth century including: the economic and socio-political conditions; the fast-growing art education in art schools; the commercial art industry using western art techniques; and the booming publishing industry in cosmopolitan Shanghai.

The Modernist Art Movement

The second critical movement is the modernist art movement in Shanghai from the 1930s to the 1940s. In this thesis Chinese modern art (中国现代艺术) is defined broadly as art with European art techniques and materials including works with a combination of both Western and traditional Chinese art techniques and materials produced in the first half of

⁴⁴ See Lang Shaojun, “五四与‘美术革命’” [“May Fourth and ‘Fine Art Revolution’”], 2009, <http://www.gmw.cn/01ds/2009-06/10/content_932307.htm>, viewed 03 December 2010. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. Also see Li Xianting, “‘五四美术革命’批判” [Critic on “May Fourth Fine Art Revolution”] in 《朵云》 [A Cloud] 3 (1990). <<https://www.douban.com/group/topic/23737225/>>, viewed on 05 May 2012.

⁴⁵ A further explanation of this term can be found in footnote 51.

⁴⁶ Lü Peng, *A History of Art in Twentieth-Century China* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), 25-45. Also see Julia F. Andrews, Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

the twentieth century. The thesis considers realist art and modernist art as aspects of modern art also combined with ideas of modernity derived from the West.⁴⁷

A precursor for the expansion of the discourse on modernist art in China was a public debate in Shanghai between a well-known artist and art educator Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 and the art critic and poet Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, generally called the “Two Xus Debate” (二徐之争) by Chinese art historians. The debate was provoked by the first *China Fine Art Exhibition* organised by the Education Ministry of the governing Nationalist Party which opened in Shanghai on 10 April 1929. The exhibition, with close to 2000 items on display, was generally divided between art in the Western style and art in the traditional Chinese style, and also included craft and architecture. During the preparation of this exhibition, when Xu Beihong discovered the selected western style artworks had strong modernist influences, he refused to show his work. In the same month of the inaugural exhibition, he published an article titled “Abashed” (惑) in the fifth edition of the *Art Exhibition Magazine* and heavily criticised the European modernists. Xu believed that academic art and realist art were the best Western models to adopt into Chinese modern art practices. His view later included the aspect of social responsibility and was supported by a large number of leftist intellectuals and artists. Xu Zhimo responded in the same edition with the title “I am also ‘Abashed’ ” (我也“惑”) stating that he stood up for the modernists and advocated the right to individual freedom in artistic expressions. The debate continued in consecutive editions and brought others into the discussion. This debate divided artists and critics into opposing camps throughout the 1930s to 1940s — the modernists and realists, though interrupted by the wars of the Japanese invasion and the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. The focal point of the debates related to the understanding of individualism where the modernists advocated freedom of individual thought and expression in art, and the realists believed in art that was a reflection of life with social responsibilities. The realists’ beliefs were supported by the left-wing writers and by the Communists who saw art as a tool for their political ends. This debate has had far-reaching repercussions in Chinese modern and contemporary art discourse.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The term Chinese modern art used in the 1980s is ambiguous as it is based not only on the above definition, but also as an expression for new artistic experimentations that one may see as influenced by postmodernism ideas. Also see my previous discussion of this issue in footnote 11.

⁴⁸ Lang Shaojun, Shui Tianzhong, ed, *Twentieth Century Chinese Fine Art Anthology*, 1996. See more details on this debate in the article of “Review ‘Two Xu’s Debate’ between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo after Eighty Years” [八十年后再看徐悲鸿、徐志摩的“二徐之辩”] by Liu Jinku 刘金库, Tianjin Academy of Fine Art, <<http://review.artintern.net/html.php?id=11905&page=0>>, viewed 18 February 2011.

The word “modern” was first phonetically translated from English into Chinese (based on the Shanghai dialect pronunciation) as Modeng 摩登 by writers from Shanghai in the early twentieth century, with a meaning of “novel and/or fashionable” from the Chinese dictionary Cihai 辞海. In a scholarly publication on Shanghai modern culture in the 1930s and 1940s, Leo Ou-fan Lee stated: “Thus in the Chinese popular imagination Shanghai and ‘modern’ are natural equivalents.”⁴⁹ In an explication on the relationship between the English word “modern” and the Chinese phrase Modeng, the Chinese artist and writer Xu Jiang commented: “Once the term ‘Modeng’ came into being, it transcended the meaning of ‘modern’ and became rooted in [the] very foundation of Shanghai society, blending into the life of one or perhaps several eras.” Xu further noted the term Modeng in modern Chinese that “conveys various facets of this city’s spirit” as “its passion and imagination, its creativity and vitality, its open-mindedness and adaptability,” as well as “its admiration for the fashionable and ability to set new trends, its acumen in calculation and a courage that allows it to take risks.”⁵⁰ From the 1920s up to the middle of the 1940s, Shanghai became the most active centre for intellectual debates on modern culture in China as a consequence of its cosmopolitan urban settings created by industrialisation, and the semi-colonial socio-political structure. Scholars have used various phrases related to their themes to characterise Shanghai in the early period of twentieth century, for example, Bergère adopted the use of Haipai 海派 (Shanghai style, Shanghai School) to characterise generally Shanghai’s economic, social, and cultural life in that period and the current government policy to resuscitate the Haipai spirit for economic growth and profitability.⁵¹ This unique environment created an open and liberal cultural atmosphere that allowed the modernist forms of art to gain momentum. Many art groups and art societies in Shanghai were formed by like-minded artists and art critics during that period. The modernist art groups were formed largely by the artists who returned from Japan or Europe. The leading figures of the modernists were Liu Haisu 刘海粟, Lin Fengmian 林风眠, Wang Yachen 汪亚尘, Ni Yide 倪貽德, Pang Xunqing 庞薰琴, Liang Xihong 梁锡鸿, Zhao Shou 赵兽, Li Dongping 李东平, and

⁴⁹ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, p.5.

⁵⁰ See in Xu Jiang, “The ‘Misreading’ of life,” in the exhibition catalogue *Shanghai Modern: 1919 – 1945*, eds. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, Zheng Shengtian (Munich: Museum Villa Stuck, Hatje Cantz, 2004), p.72.

⁵¹ The term Haipai, Bergère argues, has its root in the Chinese modern cultural history especially from the early twentieth century. It has had associations with notions of “modern” and “Western” in the past. “Initially, the term designated a regional genre of opera, but at the beginning of the twentieth century, it took on a more general sense and was applied as much to the practices of daily life as to forms of literary and artistic expression.” From the 1920s to the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese intelligentsia of the leftists have often denigrated Haipai as “represented nothing but a degenerate culture contaminated by foreign influences and subordinated to commercial interests.” A literary group from Beijing was leading a quarrel between Jingpai (Beijing School) and Haipai in the 1930s. Haipai in contemporary Chinese culture represents the economic success, urbanisation, social transformation, and cross-cultural fertilization. (See Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China’s Gateway to Modernity*, 242-284, 429-432).

Li Zhongsheng 李仲生. Among many art groups or art societies, the early “Pegasus Group” (天马会) (1919) and the later modernist groups “The Storm Society” (决澜社) (1931), the “Muse Society” (摩社) (1932) and “China Independent Art Association” (中华独立美术协会) (1935), were the most active and influential in terms of modernist art.⁵² The manifesto of “The Storm Society” on their first exhibition exemplified the modernists’ vanguard manner in pursuit of individualism. The artists described the present art world in China as “decrepit and feeble” in contrast to the “new atmosphere” that had been brought about by modernist art in Europe since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Society members considered that art was by no means an imitation of nature, and detested “old forms and old colours” and “the commonplace, low-grade cleverness.”⁵³ They were calling for the creation of a new atmosphere for China’s twentieth-century art world that “summons up the passion of wild beasts, the will of steel” together with new artistic expression to represent a “new zeitgeist.”⁵⁴

On the political front, the CCP emerged from the New Culture Movement and having embraced the “May Fourth Spirit” as part of its ideology, supported the realist style of art during the period of revolutionary struggle, and later integrated it into the Party’s cultural policy and introduced the doctrine of socialist realism in art.⁵⁵ The dynamism and legacy of the New Culture Movement thus changed and mutated by excluding the spirit of individualism. Instead, especially after the Party took power in 1949, collectivism was promoted and the concept that art should be the instrument for the Party’s political ends was incorporated into its ideology. Association with liberal ideas was forbidden in literature and art when the Communists came to power. The realist style of art moved into the mainstream in China and later joined with the socialist realism art influence of the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ Unlike socialist realism art and its ideology, early Russian avant-garde art seemed to

⁵² Lang Shaojun, “五四与‘美术革命’” (“May Fourth and ‘Fine Art Revolution’”), 2009, <http://www.gmw.cn/01ds/2009-06/10/content_932307.htm>, viewed 03 October 2010.

⁵³ See the original manifestation in the Chinese text in *Art Manifestations: review of the Western Painting community in the Republican era* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2008), 76-95. See the partial English translation in Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, p.62.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ The Communist Party of China (CCP) was formed at the founding National Congress meeting in Shanghai in July 1921. Under the Party’s ideology, its cultural policy was developed and defined by Mao in the *Yan’an Talks* in 1942 (see footnote 40) by adopting socialist realism in art. Socialist realism in China manifested in a different way from in the Soviet Union. Politically, its contents became Party’s propaganda. Artistically, it incorporated Chinese folk art style under the Party’s directives and the result was Cultural Revolution art which was totally in a political propaganda poster style.

⁵⁶ Socialist realism art is distinct from realism or social realism art. Socialist realism was developed after realism and social realism and its concept and terms were formalised in the Soviet Union during the *First Congress of Soviet Writers* in 1934. Socialist realism art set out to produce realistic imagery and to glorify communist values

run a distanced art discourse from the modernist movement in China in 1930s and 1940s, although both experienced similar rejections from realists and later socialist realism. The modernists in China were mostly affiliated with modernism's inspirations through Japan and West Europe and this was certainly the case in Shanghai. The modernist art movement in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s was disrupted by the war against Japan and the civil war between the CCP and the Nationalist Party of China, Kuomintang (KMT). After the establishment of New China (新中国) in 1949 socialist realism became the official dominant art form for artistic production and a large volume of studies on socialist realism in China and internationally has been undertaken. In this thesis, the analysis of the socialist realism influence will focus on the influence of the Soviet Union on Chinese art education in 1950s through the case studies on individual artists in order to analyse the kind of art education artists received in China and how those Shanghai avant-garde artists in the 1980s rebelled against official norms represented by socialist realism.

Artists of the realism school led by Xu Beihong became a dominant force in China and Xu was appointed as the rector of the China Academy of Fine Art and the president of China's Artists Association in Beijing by the new Communist government in 1949. By contrast, modernist art and the modernists were sidelined or purged from influential positions in art institutions in all major cities. Many modernists then resided in Shanghai or the nearby cities of Hangzhou, Suzhou and Guangzhou and their modernist art practices were forced underground.⁵⁷ The modernists and the early modernist movement were dismissed from the official cultural rhetoric after the inauguration of the New China under the Communist Party.

of the emancipation of the proletariat. Although it contains elements of social realism art, it differs on the principal idea of realistically depicting subjects of social concern. See Pavel Korin, "Thoughts on Art," *Socialist Realism in Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 95; James G. Told, "Social Realism," *Art Terms* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009). The influence of socialist realism from the Soviet Union was embraced by the CCP as the tool to promote its ideology in 1930s and 1940s.

⁵⁷ For example, the abstractionist Wu Dayu 吴大羽 lived through political turmoils after 1949, but continued to paint in his individual art style privately in his flat in the former French concession in Shanghai. There were many similar cases in the country under the political conditions of the period from 1949 to 1976. However, Shanghai has been the strongest and most concentrated modernist base in China as I have argued in all chapters of the thesis. (See Zhao Chuan 赵川, 《上海抽象的故事》 [*The Story of Shanghai Abstract (Art)*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2006). Chen Danqing, "陈丹青: 我的回忆——70年代的美术和美术展览" [Chen Danqing: My memory - The 1970s Art and Exhibitions], 《回忆与陈述--关于1949年之后的中国艺术和艺术史》 [*Memories and Statements: About Chinese Art and Art History after 1949*], ed. Lü Peng (Hunan: Hunan Fine Art Publishing House, 2007). <<http://www.92to.com/wenhua/2016/04-16/3417622.html>>, accessed on 25/04/2016.

In international scholarship after 1949, there has been a general view that there is clear evidence of Western modernist influence in China in literature, film and theatre during the first half of the twentieth century. Sullivan's critical writings published in 1959 and 1996 on this subject have provided rich evidence of the influence of modernism on art in China in this period. In fully recognising the contributions and influences on the history of Chinese art in the twentieth century by some critical figures such as Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, and Lin Fengmian, Sullivan also reflected on different views that represented different schools. By citing the views of others, he commented:

Although one modern Chinese painter expressed to me the opinion that Xu Beihong had set back the development of Chinese art by forty years – a view shared by a number of radical young artists – it must be acknowledged that he was a key figure during his lifetime, and that his struggles, accomplishments, and failures illuminate the history of Chinese twentieth-century painting more, perhaps, than those of any other artist.⁵⁸

There are also the original historical materials in Chinese on early twentieth-century Chinese art as well as commentaries produced since the 1980s that are accessible now in China. A scholarly researched exhibition *Shanghai Modern* was staged at the Museum of Villa Stuck, Munich, on 14 October 2004 that provided historical evidence of the connection to European modernism in China. That influence was played out not only in one direction, but in “a two-way affair” by a number of Chinese art exhibitions to Europe in the early half of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ More historical evidence on that front has resurfaced in China during the last twenty years through various channels including private art collections. The recent phenomenon of the expansion of private art museums in China from the 2010s has brought challenges to the state-owned art museums in both collection and exhibition policies. The state-owned art museums do not have adequate systematic collection policies related to the modern art of the early twentieth century period, and only have scattered collections at various locations. Their collections are based on the artists who are considered significant for their artistic achievements, however, significance in this case is determined by political considerations. Though the collection policies of public art museums in China is a fascinating topic, it is outside the scope of this thesis to discuss it at length here.

An example of the challenge is the Long Museum's inaugural exhibition of its art collection in Shanghai in 2012.⁶⁰ It has a large body of art in the collection from the

⁵⁸ Sullivan, *Art and Artists*, p.133.

⁵⁹ Birnie Danzker, “Shanghai Modern,” p.18-103.

⁶⁰ The Long Museum was founded by the business and collector couple Mr Liu Yiqian 刘益谦 and Ms Wang Wei 王薇 in Shanghai in 2012.

Republican era through to the present. In the accompanying bilingual (Chinese/English) exhibition catalogue entitled *"New Art History: A Chronological Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Art from Long Collection,"* the images in the collection present a progression of Chinese modern art developments and show strong evidence of the influence of Western modernism. The art historian Lü Peng in his introductory essay in this catalogue called on readers to "Rethink Our Art History."⁶¹ The Long Museum's art collection has revealed Shanghai's art scene from the 1910s to the 1940s demonstrating that modernism influenced not only literature and film in Shanghai, but also visual art. This important aspect in the history of museology has not been taken on board in art discourse either locally and internationally. This thesis aims to contribute to a fuller understanding of the complexities of contemporary art in China by including such museological and historical art perspectives.

Evaluation of early twentieth-century Chinese modern art history has been distorted by the political agendas of the Communist Party throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and the focus of the discourse in this process shifted from individualism in art to the individual's role in terms of social and political responsibility. As a movement, modernism in Chinese art was short-lived because of China's war with Japan (1937-1945), the civil war between Communists and Nationalists (1945-1949), followed by the repression imposed by the Communist Party from 1949 to the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976. The legacy of modernism as this thesis reveals, however, survived, kept alive by the early modernist artists and was passed on to and continued by their students and then by an even younger generation of artists. Moreover, my research into influences on selected artists in Shanghai in this thesis demonstrates the nexus between early modernism and the avant-garde artistic experimentations in the 1980s. Hence, I suggest that the historical attributes and the local characteristics of the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai demand greater attention in the contemporary Chinese art discourse.

Shanghai at the Forefront of Avant-Garde Art in China in the 1980s

In China's modern history Shanghai played a critical and leading role in the emergence of modern art and art practice in the first half of the twentieth-century. In this thesis I will explore the influence Shanghai had on the evolution of the avant-garde art scene in China in the 1980s and demonstrate the significance of the spirit of individualism for art in Shanghai in that decade. I argue strongly that these developments cannot be seen as an imitation or simple adoption of Western contemporary art, but rather should be viewed in the context of

⁶¹ Lü Peng, "Rethink Our Art History," in *New Art History: A Chronological Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Art from Long Collection*, Long Museum, (Shanghai: Shanghai Jinxiu Wenzhang Publishing House, 2012) p.xiv.

the political and social conditions of the time. Thus, this thesis sets out to investigate the causes of a particular mode of art production in Shanghai in the 1980s and to examine this through individual case studies within a historical and socio-political context. The role of Shanghai will be outlined briefly in this section and further illustrated through the case studies in the following chapters.

It is generally recognised by scholars of modernism in arts in China that prior to 1949 Shanghai was the centre for trade, finance, culture and art industries including film and theatre in China. There is substantial literature on each of these areas, especially on film and theatre. While the scope of this thesis does not allow lengthy discussion of these aspects it is, however, important to note that, for example, the first cinema in China was opened at the Shanghai Xuyuan 徐园 in 1896. The first modern theatre script with dialogue *Lonely Army* 《孤军》 was created in 1921 by Shanghai actor, director, and scriptwriter Gu Jianchen 谷剑塵, the grandfather of Gu Wenda 谷文达, an avant-garde artist Shanghai in the 1980s whose work is discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

The influential Western Style Painting Movement of the early twentieth-century can be seen as an historic landmark.⁶² The movement was centred in Shanghai and had a number of associated events there. It expanded across the country in the period from the 1910s to the 1940s introducing European art practices that included techniques and materials. Significant developments in Shanghai in relation to this movement included the rapid emergence of commercial industries which led to flourishing publishing and printing businesses for example, the production of the first comprehensive art magazine *Meishu* 美术 [*Fine Art*] focusing on the study of Western art, and the iconic calendars and posters *Yuefenpai* 月份牌 which combined painted Chinese vogue images with commercial advertisements. At the same time there was also the first manufacturer supplying Western art materials, the Mali Arts & Crafts Factory (马利工艺厂) (1919) with its art supply products including “Horse Head” brand (马头牌), and the Jincheng Arts & Crafts Society (金城工艺社) (1926) with its own products branded under “Old Eagle” (老鹰牌). (Figure 3, 4.) The large

⁶² See Chen Baoyi 陈抱一, 《洋画运动过程略记》 [A Brief History of Western Style Painting Movement], 《上海艺术月刊》 [*Shanghai Art Monthly*] vol.5-12 (1942). Also see: Wang Ren, “A Study on the Eve of Western Painting Movement in Shanghai,” in *China Fine Art Research* 3ed. (Shanghai: East China Normal University, 2014); Li Chao, 《中国早期油画史》 [*China's Early Oil Painting History*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2004).



Figure 3. *Evening Makeup* 《晚妆图》
Poster/Calendar, Zheng Mantuo 郑曼陀, 1914.



Figure 4. “Horse Head” brand (马头牌) watercolour paint
packaging by Mali Craft Factory (马利工艺厂), 1930s.

number of artists returning from overseas studies at that time also formed the earliest local artist groups devoted to Western art practice, the earliest Western art training workshop, and assisted the rapid establishment of art schools. It has been recognised that Western art training and art education were critical to this movement. The earliest European art training studio Tushanwan Art and Crafts Workshop (土山湾工艺美术工坊) was established in 1864 in the Tushanwan 土山湾 area (today’s Xuhui district) in the west part of Shanghai. The Workshop was opened by two Catholic missionaries, the Spaniard Joannes Ferrer (Chinese name Fan Tingzuo), and the Italian Nicolas Massa (Chinese name Ma Yigu) with an initial membership of students from the church orphanage. The Painting Studio was well known for providing apprenticeship training in drawing, watercolour, oil painting, and sculpture by largely copying masters’ works. The Workshop also accepted commissions for works from the public. Up to 1907, the Workshop published art instruction books that were made available to the public. Many well-known Chinese artists received Western art training from this Workshop.⁶³ In an article published in 1942, Xu Beihong praised Tushanwan Art and Crafts Workshop as “the cradle of Western-style painting in China.”⁶⁴

The Shanghai Fine Art College (SFAC) was the first art education institution in China in terms of teaching methods and aesthetic directions in line with Western art.⁶⁵ It was

⁶³ *Tushanwan Huaguan*, Office of Shanghai Chronicles Website (in Chinese), Viewed April 14, 2016. <www.shtong.gov.cn/newsite/node2/nide82538/node84939/node84997/84999/node85001/userobject1ai86760.html>

⁶⁴ Xu Beihong, 《新艺术运动的回顾与前瞻》[“Review and Prospect of New Art Movement”], in 《时事新报》[*Chongqing Current News*] (1942). Original Chinese text: “盖中国西洋画之摇篮也。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁶⁵ There are volumes of literature on Shanghai Fine Art College in Chinese that are available in the Shanghai Library and the Shanghai Liu Haisu Art Museum. For example, see Jiang Ying 蒋英, “New and Old Fine Art

established in 1912, privately founded by the artist Wu Shiguan 乌始光 supported jointly by Liu Haisu, Wang Yachen 王亚尘 and two other artists. It was regarded as ground-breaking in the history of Chinese modern art education because the academy introduced co-education and an unprecedented program of life drawing and painting from nude models in the class that constituted an avant-garde action directly challenging Chinese cultural and social norms. (Figure 5.) This led to a decade-long fight between modernist-artist Liu Haisu against the local authorities and the powerful warlord Sun Chuanfang 孙传芳 who allegedly sought to arrest him, as a result of pressure from conservative factions in society.⁶⁶ Sullivan has called the Shanghai Fine Art College “a true birthplace of modern art in China” displaying “total freedom from prejudice against any particular school of painting.” He attributed the school’s success as “owing largely to Liu Haisu’s courage, energy, and gifts as an organizer.”⁶⁷



Figure 5. SFAC’s drawing class in 1910s.

There is an extensive body of scholarly literature both in Chinese and English on Shanghai’s political, economic, social and cultural history demonstrating the urban cosmopolitan milieu of Shanghai and portraying both positive and negative images in relation to the progression of China’s modernisation before 1949.⁶⁸ After 1949, as previously

Colleges: Two Fine Art Colleges in Shanghai History” (新老美专：上海历史上的两所美术专科学校), in *Arts Exploration* 29.4 (2015): 89-94 and Zheng Jie Jane, “The Shanghai Fine Art College, 1913-1937” (M.A diss.), (Hong Kong University, 2006).

⁶⁶ The warlord Sun Chuanfang 孙传芳 was the Commander for the “League of five provinces” of Zhe 浙, Min 闽, Su 苏, Wan 皖, and Gan 赣. Shanghai belonged to the province of Su that was under Sun’s jurisdiction during the early Republican era. There was also another life drawing and painting from nude model art training program introduced by Li Shutong 李叔同 at Hangzhou 杭州 Teachers Training College near Shanghai at a similar time. However, it did not cause controversy and had far less impact on society.

⁶⁷ See in Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists*, 31.

⁶⁸ To avoid detailing a long list of the literature or authors on this topic in Chinese here, I have selected a few that are pertinent to this thesis from international scholarly studies that have influenced my research and writing; Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century*; Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China’s Gateway to Modernity*; Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945*; Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-colonial China, 1917-1937*.

noted, Shanghai's modernity and its semi-colonial past were relegated by the Party to being the national shame of the country, used to promote the negative portrayal of capitalist and bourgeois influences, and kept under strict political and cultural control. Mao's mandate in 1965 to the Gang of Four to criticise an historical drama entitled *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (海瑞罢官) marked the start of the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai in 1966.⁶⁹ This event again associated Shanghai with a negative image in the public perception. After the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai's status changed with the "reform and opening-up" policy in the 1980s and the more relaxed political and cultural conditions saw a revival, as I suggested earlier in this chapter, of the modernist legacy by artists in Shanghai. They started to mount self-organised, sophisticated art exhibitions to challenge the status quo of official art. The *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* held at the beginning of the 1979 and discussed later in this thesis exemplifies the unofficial art exhibition and was, I argue, the earliest example in this kind of exhibition in China.⁷⁰ The unofficial art exhibition is an important feature in the 1980s' avant-garde art scene in Shanghai. This subject and the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* will be examined further in Chapter 1.

Many scholarly cultural studies on Shanghai's modern history often depict images of Shanghai derived from the literature of Chinese intellectuals produced during the 1920s and 1930s.⁷¹ As discussed earlier in this Introduction art commentators have generally used the words "individual" or "individualistic" to characterise how the artistic community functioned in terms of art production, the artists' ways of living and the contemporary art scene in Shanghai. These characterisations go together with the suggestion by Leo Ou-fan Lee that "in the Chinese popular imagination Shanghai and 'modern' are natural equivalents."⁷² The semi-colonial history of the city, as well as a cosmopolitan open attitude, often influenced

⁶⁹ The historical drama *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* was written by an historian and Beijing Deputy Mayor Wu Han 吴晗 in 1959. It was seen by Mao and his supporters as a metaphor to criticise him and his political and economic policies. Under Mao's direction, the Gang of Four member the propagandist Yao Wenyuan 姚文元 wrote an article entitled "评新编历史剧'海瑞罢官'" ["Critic on the New Historical Drama "Hai Rui Dismissed from Office"]. It was published initially in the Shanghai *Wenhui* newspaper to criticise this drama and aimed at purging the political dissidents in the Party. It is generally regarded as marking the start of the Cultural Revolution.

⁷⁰ Art exhibitions big or small had been organised systematically through official bureaucracies in China after the CCP came into power in 1949. In the 1980s, the art exhibitions freely formed by like-minded artists without official bureaucratic involvement were called in Chinese 在野画展, or 非官方画展 [unofficial art exhibition]. See an in-depth discussion on Shanghai's unofficial art exhibitions in the 1980s in Chapter 1 under the subheading "The Critical Early Unofficial Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s."

⁷¹ This is exemplified by the writings of a number of scholars. See for example, Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*; Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*; and Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*.

⁷² Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, p.5.

the city's living conditions in which the artists retained a private way of living and working separately from each other. Therefore, in the discourse, perceptions of and commentaries on contemporary art from Shanghai tend to link it to aesthetic or philosophical concerns and consider it as weak in terms of direct political and social impact.⁷³ Quite often, critics have drawn a comparison between the art scenes in Shanghai and Beijing based on the characteristics of the artists. Artists in Beijing are characterised as “Zhadui 扎堆” (to congregate together) or “Quanzi 圈子” (group). This characteristic derives from the phenomenon in the 1980s that was described as “Qunti Xianxiang 群体现象” (group phenomenon).⁷⁴ Since the 1980s there has been a large population of artists from other parts of the country living and working in concentrated areas and grouped together in the capital, Beijing. With the city's imperial, political and cultural history and role as the centre of power for all contemporary life in China, artists there live in an environment of the presence of imminent counter-reactions in confronting interferences from the central power and intellectual agitations from major national art institutions or academies. The realist art style was dominant in Beijing and elsewhere in the country.⁷⁵ Engaging political language in groups was the recognised feature of contemporary art in Beijing in the 1980s and 1990s. Influential Beijing-based critic Li Xianting 栗宪庭 commented that this group phenomenon was “a unique phenomenon in China” in the 1980s, and described the “groups” as a “social phenomenon” rather than about art itself.⁷⁶ Collectivism, a tendency in contemporary art in China in the 1980s, was represented by art groups with manifestos of shared values and supported by a group of influential young critics living in Beijing at that time. This aspect will be examined further in Chapter 1.

In contrast to the Beijing avant-garde art scene with its bevy of influential art critics shaping the discourse during the 1980s, as discussed above Shanghai presented a different perspective on avant-garde art activities. There the discourse radiated from an individual and private base. Like all cities in China, the avant-garde artists in Shanghai were not large in

⁷³ One example of such perception occurred in the earlier publication: Gao Minglu, et al., 《中国当代美术史 1985-1986》 [The Contemporary Chinese Art History 1985-1986] (Shanghai: 1991).

⁷⁴ An in-depth analysis on this phenomenon is provided in Chapter 1 in the section under the title of “National discourse and local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s.”

⁷⁵ This is reflected in writings on contemporary Chinese art, for example by Li Xianting and Gao Minglu. See Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art;” and Gao Minglu, et al., ‘85 Movement: *The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*.

⁷⁶ In a conversation with John Clark on 23 Jan 1990, Li Xianting stated: “Yes, this group phenomenon has been a unique phenomenon in China over the past decade. It is not an artistic value, to my mind, but rather a social phenomenon. [...]. Because the major issue for Chinese modern art is not art per se, but breaking social repression. It is about struggling against social norms. It wants to live, it seeks life's meaning.” [See John Clark, *China and Chinese Artists Overseas (Asian Artist Interview Transcriptions – in Chinese)*, vol.I, Australian National University, Canberra, 1992. pp.64-65.]

terms of numbers, especially in the early 1980s. Under the socio-political conditions, these avant-garde artists communicated with each other at a person-to-person level, often by private studio visits that took place among a small network of avant-garde artists. During those visits, they exchanged ideas and provided critiques of each other's new work. This particular type of activity that was conducted by the avant-garde artists in Shanghai in the 1980s I term "studio discourse," (as distinct from public discourse). In this thesis, I argue "studio discourse" from Shanghai echoed the spirit of individualism and represents a local Shanghai voice in the country's national discourse. This important factor will be examined in Chapter 1 as well as reflected through the artist case study chapters.

Scope of Thesis, Approach and Methodology

In this thesis, I examine the role individuals in Shanghai played in the development of Chinese contemporary art in the period of the 1980s as well as exploring institutional structures that supported art by means of individual case studies of six artists and one major public art museum – the Shanghai Art Museum. My methodology is drawn from the disciplines of art history and cultural and political history as well as museology. I employ an interdisciplinary approach to investigate fundamental concepts such as individualism and questions related to the influence of Western culture in the changes in contemporary Chinese art within the specific cultural milieu and geographic location of Shanghai. The timing of artistic experimentations and exhibitions is critical for the argument of the thesis. Thus the thesis is organised chronologically covering the period 1979-1989.

In this thesis, I also examine and analyse modern and postmodern art and cultural theories from both the West and China, drawing extensively on perspectives from critical contemporary studies on Asian art and culture, especially on China. These include the ground-breaking work on modernity in Asian art by John Clark and insightful publications on the modern and contemporary cultural history of East Asian countries by Geremie R. Barmé.⁷⁷ I focus particularly in this thesis on the work of Chinese writers and intellectuals. Much of this material is only available in Chinese. These crucial contemporary studies from China are examined in detail in Chapter 1 under the subheading "National discourse and local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ For example, John Clark, ed. "Open and Closed Discourse of Modernity in Asian Art," *Modernity in Asian Art* (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993), Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red - On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁷⁸ See also in this Introduction under the subheading of "National discourse and local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."

The thesis is based largely on primary source materials. These include interviews, archival documents and published material such as art catalogues and essays on art from the 1980s. I also evaluate and provide a visual analysis of key artworks produced by the artists in my case studies. My research has been informed by my long-term friendship with artists, art administrators, writers and my personal experiences as a practising artist in Shanghai during the 1980s, and as a curator at the Shanghai Art Museum. During the course of my research for this thesis I have conducted over a hundred interviews as well as undertaking informal research involving artists, curators and directors of art museums, art administrators of various art organisations, art educators at both school and university levels, writers and art historians, gallerists and librarians, who directly and indirectly were involved in avant-garde art in Shanghai and elsewhere in China in 1980s. My personal friendship with artists, art administrators, and other individuals has enabled me to access their private collections and archives. The empirical methodology in this thesis is determined by issues in the discourse and the problems I have identified in the art historiography of contemporary Chinese art with what I argue is at times a too theoretical approach taken by some writers. I examine these issues in depth in Chapter 1 as well as throughout the thesis. To comply with responsible research practices in ethical conduct, I obtained Ethics Clearance for conducting this research from the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee in 2007.

This thesis is based on research conducted extensively through Chinese sources and Chinese language interviews. Especially where there have been limited sources available on the subject both inside and outside China, all original information and material in Chinese presented or referenced in the thesis has been translated into English by myself (Lansheng Zhang) and Dr David Kelly,⁷⁹ with some exceptions when English translations of materials were available. As English is my second language, an editor Thuy Pham has assisted with copy-editing the manuscript.

My interest in undertaking scholarly research on avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s began in the year 2000 after the Shanghai Biennale when I was involved with the Biennale's symposium at the Shanghai Art Museum.⁸⁰ I embarked on this research project and returned to China in 2004 at a time when contemporary Chinese art was emerging onto the international art stage and art market. The artists and art critics in China were occupied with immediate issues of how to move contemporary art debates forward. There was very

⁷⁹ Dr David Kelly is currently the Managing Director of China Policy, a Beijing-based policy research consultancy. Previous roles have included Professor of Chinese Politics at Peking University, University of Technology, Sydney, National University of Singapore, and UNSW-ADFA.

⁸⁰ I was engaged by the Shanghai Art Museum for research, advice and translation for the symposium during the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. I lived in Europe at the time.

little interest then in discussions about Chinese art developments in the 1980s, nor very much published material available for research especially in relation to avant-garde art in Shanghai in the period of the 1980s. In 2008 I undertook six months of fieldwork in China supported by an Endeavour Research Fellowship awarded by the Australian Government Department of Education. During this period of research I focused on materials in major libraries and archives in China on avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s. I travelled between Shanghai and Beijing and Hong Kong visiting libraries including the Shanghai Library, Shanghai City Archive, the library and archive of the Shanghai Art Museum, the Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA)⁸¹ library, the Shanghai Museum library, the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) library in Beijing, the contemporary Chinese art archive in the History Department of Beijing University, and the Asia Art Archive (AAA) in Hong Kong. My research revealed that there was a lack of information and materials in the collections of those institutions and inadequate studies on avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s. An exception was the AAA in Hong Kong which in 2006 had started an archiving project: “*Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990.*” It was then a work-in-progress and no part of the material was accessible at that point. I was able to access this material later through further research for this thesis. This archiving project was launched in September 2010 as comprehensive website portal for public access with video interviews and the transcripts, largely in Chinese.⁸² It has become an important source for complementing my research and interviews. My research findings vindicate my argument that the avant-garde art and the spirit of individualism in that art from Shanghai in the 1980s has been neglected in the discourse, and that it deserves an in-depth scholarly study to fill this gap in the narratives of China’s contemporary art. Therefore, this thesis aims to contribute original knowledge to the historiography of contemporary Chinese art.

Over the last ten years one approach in collecting and documenting materials as part of my research methodology has been to reconnect myself with the local art discourse by attending and participating in seminars and art events related to the 1980s art scene in Shanghai. Among the activities, one important event I participated in as an artist was to show my own early artworks produced in the 1980s in the exhibition *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985* which, together with an associated seminar, was organised by the Zendai Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai in 2008. Although the exhibition had a focus on the genre of abstraction in art in Shanghai, it

⁸¹ The Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA) is referred to in English in various ways including Shanghai Drama Institute and Shanghai Academy of Drama. For consistency in this thesis I have used the acronym STA unless the name is referred to in a direct quote.

⁸² AAA archiving project, “Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990,” (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2006). < www.china1980s.org>, viewed 02 November 2010.

presented valuable visual materials related to artworks produced in Shanghai in the 1980s. It also raised awareness of the significance of the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai in the 1980s for both the public in Shanghai and more importantly the art world in China. The involvement with local art activities has enabled me to engage in dialogue with a wide range of people to open channels in identifying or locating crucial works and artists in the Shanghai art scene in the 1980s and it has informed my thinking on the development of the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Selection of Case Studies

This thesis is not a general survey of avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s, but rather an argument about the specific attribute of individualism in particular but also the legacy of modernism in avant-garde art in Shanghai in the period of the 1980s. It is my contention that there is a lack of adequate studies on the subject of individualism and that it has been overlooked in the discourse of writing on contemporary Chinese art. The case study methodology adopted in the thesis is aimed at providing an in-depth account and analysis of documentary evidence from my interviews and other sources on individual contributions in art productions and the role a public art museum played in the Shanghai art scene in the 1980s. The concept of individualism and the role and function of individuals and institutions who I argue acted as “catalysts” in the evolution of avant-garde art in the 1980s, are the basic criteria for the selection of the artists, institutions and exhibitions discussed in the case studies.

The thesis consists of a major art museum case study and four chapters of artist case studies on six artists. The case study on the Shanghai Art Museum was chosen to highlight how individuals influenced the role that a public museum played in the contemporary art scene in Shanghai in the 1980s and because of the Museum’s unique position in the transformations in contemporary art in Shanghai and the significance of the exhibitions held there in that period. I argue that the museum acted to bring about change within a specific political bureaucratic system. This case study includes analysis of a selection of exhibitions that, I will argue, were significant and influential in the development of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s.

The artist case studies are of six artists: Zhang Jianjun 张健君, Li Shan 李山, Yu Youhan 余友涵, Chen Zhen 陈箴, Cai Guoqiang 蔡国强, and Gu Wenda 谷文达 whose art and ideas, I argue, are momentous in changes in art in Shanghai in the period of 1980s. The selection is based on four criteria: first, the artistic merits in the work of the selected artists whose art, I argue, was experimental and/or ground-breaking. I use the word “experiment” or

“experimental” to describe the art practices of selected artists in this thesis as well as other Shanghai artists, to emphasise the radical and innovative nature of their practice, and the risks taken in pursuing their art, and especially in the political environment at that time in China. Their experiments in art were often in advance of new art trends in China in the 1980s articulated by influential critics in China such as Li Xianting and Gao Minglu.⁸³ Second, each artist took a strong position in espousing individualism to resist the popular tendency of collectivist new art movements that emerged in major cities in China in the 1980s. Third, each artist had a strong affiliation with the Shanghai art milieu in this period. Fourth, they were a major influence on their contemporaries and in precipitating change. I contend that their innovative and pioneering artistic experimentations underpinned by their stance on individualism heralded a transformation in aesthetic language that stands out in the avant-garde art scene not only in Shanghai but also across China in the 1980s. This represented a distinguishing quality that achieved expression and visible form in avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised thematically and chronologically with this Introduction and Chapter 1 followed by the five case study chapters: Chapter 2 to Chapter 6, and a Conclusion.

In Chapter 1, the focus is on three aspects: (1) a review and literature analysis of the contemporary art discourse in China related to the period of the 1980s, (2) a discussion of the significance of local unofficial art exhibitions and influential international art exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s,⁸⁴ and (3) the crucial art institutions in Shanghai in the 1980s. The art discourse in Shanghai in the 1980s reflected the city’s unique historical and political conditions. I suggest this discourse was presented in terms of a “studio discourse” rather than following conventional forms. Through the examination of key literature on contemporary Chinese art I argue that the essence of the distinctive spirit of individualism in the Shanghai avant-garde art scene has been overlooked and some key works by Shanghai avant-garde artists were displaced in terms of the timing of their production to suit the theoretical narratives developed by the authors. In relation to the exhibitions and the matrix of art institutions in Shanghai, I focus on how those key art institutions and unofficial art

⁸³ The new art trends are discussed under the subheading “National discourse and local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s” in this Introduction and in Chapter 1.

⁸⁴ The significant unofficial art exhibition in Shanghai and the international art exhibitions discussed are; the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition*, the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983*, the *Concave-Convex Exhibition*, the *M group show*, the *Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century*, and the *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*.

exhibitions contributed to a distinctive local Shanghai voice in contemporary art in China during the period covered by this thesis. My investigation examines aspects of art education and grassroots community art structures in Shanghai to show how these institutions and exhibitions played an important role in the local avant-garde art scene in the 1980s. The research indicates that the social milieu of Shanghai was a hothouse for new ideas.

Chapter 2 focuses on a pivotal art institution — the Shanghai Art Museum — as a museological case study. I explore how this art museum played a role in contemporary Chinese art, and how the spirit of individualism has been transmitted through its exhibitions and other activities. The chapter will analyse the dynamism of a public art institution under a bureaucratic structure and demonstrate the contributions made by individuals who engaged with the local avant-garde art scene in the 1980s as art administrators within the organisation. A number of critical exhibitions will be highlighted to demonstrate the significant changes in museum practices that started to take place at the Shanghai Art Museum during this period. My argument is that there has been a lack of adequate study on the role the Shanghai Art Museum played in the development of contemporary Chinese art and art museums in the 1980s. It has been overlooked in the art discourse in China and internationally. It is my contention that the Shanghai Art Museum played a role as a forerunner among Chinese art museums in engaging with avant-garde art in China in the 1980s. Through transformative exhibitions, it acted as a leader of curatorial practices in public art museums in China.

In the four case study chapters on the six selected artists (Chapters 3 to 6), I will demonstrate how the spirit of individualism was embedded in individual aesthetic language during the artists' early formative years and articulated through their art practices at different stages during 1980s. I explore how those individual artists have been at the forefront of the evolution of avant-garde art, and served as catalysts in the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai. My investigation probes individual artistic journeys in these case studies, and draws out the evidence from the artistic experimentation of those protagonists. Their art practices, I argue, illustrate how they were at the forefront of contemporary Chinese art in ways distinct from the prevailing art trends in the rest of the country. While the artist case studies take a common approach in examining each artist's art and life through family background, education, art practice, intellectual inspirations, and social environment, the thesis emphasises individual characteristics in relation to the art that the artists produced in the 1980s. In doing so, I provide multi-dimensional evidence to substantiate the distinctiveness and the significance of avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s within the development of contemporary Chinese art.

Chapter 3 focuses on artist Zhang Jianjun's art practice and highlights his pioneering and highly original mixed media and abstract works produced in the early 1980s, when according to a number of authoritative texts produced by Chinese art critics and historians, the country's art was still in the Scar Art period. This was a time when art broke away from the propaganda styles especially of the Cultural Revolution (where everything was perfect and everyone is smiling) to explore some of the realities of life. The analysis in this chapter follows Zhang's art journey to trace the influences on his art and the source of his firm position in distancing himself from collectivist movements in the 1980s. I argue that his artistic experimentation and his strong belief in individualism distinguish him as a pioneer in the avant-garde art scene in the early 1980s, not only in Shanghai but also elsewhere in China. His influence and contribution to the avant-garde art scene as the head of the research department and the director's assistant in the Shanghai Art Museum during the 1980s will be explored in this chapter. I argue that the significant contribution of Zhang's art from the early 1980s, and his distinctive individualistic standpoint in resisting collectivist driven art movements in China during the 1980s, have not been recognised fully in the art discourse both in China and internationally.

Chapter 4 follows artist Li Shan and his career from his journey as a young idealistic student coming from a small town in China's northeast to Shanghai to study art at the STA. The chapter explores Li's life — how he encountered and perceived the city of Shanghai and the valuable art experiences he encountered there, meeting and being influenced by the early generation modernists at the STA, as well as the society outside the Academy. The analysis in this chapter highlights Li's independent and nonconformist approach to life and art through his painful experiences with a number of political criticisms or purges as an art student and also later as a young art lecturer. The chapter examines the subject of sexuality in Li Shan's art whether in his abstract paintings or figurative works from the beginning of the 1980s, when such a subject was forbidden to be expressed in any cultural production in China, an aspect which has not been fully recognised and discussed in connection with Li's early 1980s' works. It is my contention in this chapter that Li's nonconformist character continually challenged the status quo in both art forms and in the content and the subject matter of his art from the early 1980s and that he stood out from his peers in avant-garde art in China.

Chapter 5 analyses artist Yu Youhan's work by tracing the artist's childhood and family life, his art education and social environment, in order to comprehend fully the formation of an artistic language and the psychological resonances in his abstract paintings that he embarked on from the early 1980s. The analysis focuses on the impact of socio-political changes on the artist's family and how his mother's illness cast a shadow that was reflected

in his art. I argue that this is one of the critical elements of Yu's art and one that has been neglected in the literature on Yu's art. In this chapter, my research highlights his interactions and friendships with an intimate connection to the early generation of modernists such as the Fan family. I demonstrate through this case study how early twentieth-century Chinese modernist art survived political repression, continued through generations of artists, and was built into Shanghai's social fabric. I argue that the legacy of the early modernist art movement of the first half of the twentieth century in the social environment of Shanghai cherishes the spirit of individualism that embraces individual artistic expression that enabled Yu in pursuing his art to reflect his own life experience.

Chapter 6 examines the ideas and art practices of three renowned artists from the international contemporary art arena, Chen Zhen, Cai Guoqiang, and Gu Wenda. This chapter focuses on their common affiliation with Shanghai and their early artistic careers in the 1980s in relation to the main themes of this thesis. Their early artistic careers established an important base for these three artists in forming their thinking and the later direction of their art practices. The uniqueness of the art milieu of Shanghai and how it was conducive and critical to the development of avant-garde art in 1980s, will be explored through these three case studies. I also examine their own writing and statements in particular on the subject of individualism which provide essential documentation for ideas advanced in this thesis. Their intellectual rigor and their artistic creativity, like the three artists discussed in the earlier chapters, displays a multifaceted art education in the absence of any formal art academy in Shanghai after 1949. Their intellectual capacity for individualistic thinking is best demonstrated in their artistic explorations that do not blindly follow Western ideas but incorporate also traditional Eastern ideas in their art expressions.

In the Conclusion to this thesis, I sum up what I have demonstrated throughout in analysing the role of Shanghai in avant-garde art in China in the 1980s. I argue that the essence of avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s was the quality of individualism combined with strong historical connections to the early twentieth-century modernist art movement in Shanghai. I demonstrate in the thesis that these elements have been overlooked in the national and international discourse on contemporary Chinese art and that this has resulted in inadequate evaluation and representation of Shanghai avant-garde art from the decade of the 1980s in the art historiography of contemporary China.

Chapter 1.

Art Discourse, the Matrix of Art Institutions and Organisations, and Unofficial Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s

In the Introduction, I defined the terms “the spirit of individualism” and “the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism” and argued that these were the distinguishing characteristics of avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s.⁸⁵ In this chapter, I will further investigate this concept by examining discourses on contemporary art in China during this period, and by analysing key institutions and organisations and both early unofficial exhibitions and influential international exhibitions in Shanghai. First I will discuss the contemporary art discourse in China in the 1980s by selecting influential writings from both mainland and overseas Chinese writers to demonstrate where Shanghai was positioned in terms of a national context. In a country such as China, with a heavily centralised governing system under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a distanced local environment can be a vital breeding ground for avant-garde art to evade control by the central authorities, and I argue that such was the situation in Shanghai in the 1980s. Secondly, I will present an overview of the matrix of key art institutions and organisations in Shanghai in that decade. These institutions played an important role in avant-garde art activities in Shanghai in the 1980s. I will then highlight the critical phenomenon of unofficial art exhibitions in Shanghai in this period. These exhibitions were selected because they exemplify the essential qualities of Shanghai’s avant-garde art in that decade. I will then discuss key international exhibitions that took place in this period that influenced artists in Shanghai. In the next chapter, I provide an in-depth examination of the role of the Shanghai Art Museum in the development of contemporary art in the 1980s.

National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s

The discourse on avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s must be analysed in the context of transformations in art in China. The vibrant contemporary art discourse in the 1980s was largely created from the political change that followed the crucial Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China at the end of 1978. In this pivotal meeting, the Party changed its primary direction from ideological dictums to economic development and set the new direction for the country with the “reform and opening-up” policy in 1979. After a decade long suppression during the Cultural

⁸⁵ See the definitions in the beginning section of the Introduction as well as in the section under the heading of “The Spirit of Individualism in the Chinese Modern and Contemporary Art Context.”

Revolution, the discourse in China relating to culture and the arts began to thaw and quickly built up a momentum.⁸⁶

The developing art trends during the 1980s were articulated by Chinese art critics and historians in the national contemporary art discourse. The art trends in the 1980s have been separated into three critical periods: a) the revival of early modernist art followed by the Scar Art (伤痕艺术) and Native Soil Painting (乡土自然主义绘画) from 1978 to 1984; b) the '85 Art New Wave movement from 1985 to 1986; c) the "Back-to-the-Roots" movement and the "Purified Language" movement from 1987 to 1989.⁸⁷ Each of these art trends to some degree broke away from the prevailing official art paradigm.

The discourse in the early period (1978-1984) was concerned with the search for new art forms opposed to the political art of the Cultural Revolution and revolved around two important events. The first was the emergence of the Scar (伤痕) phenomenon in literature, performance art, film and visual art; and the second was a debate initiated by an essay entitled "Formalist Aesthetics in Painting" (绘画形式美) by one of the influential earlier generation modernists Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中 (1919-2010) published in the Beijing-based art magazine *Meishu* 美术 (*Fine Art*) in 1979.⁸⁸ The Scar Art phenomenon was triggered by the short novel *Scar* by Shanghai writer Lu Xinhua 卢新华, first published in the Shanghai local *Wenhui Newspaper* (文汇报) in 1978, about the painful experiences of people during the Cultural Revolution which had left deep scars in the memories of many, especially young people who were taken out of high schools and colleges to be part of the campaign for "educated city youth to go down to the countryside" ("知识青年到农村去").⁸⁹ These

⁸⁶ Prior to the end of the 1970s the art discourse was described by the key phrase "Bring Order out of Chaos" (拨乱反正) in the socio-political context of the post-Cultural Revolution years. It is important to be aware that the contemporary art discourse in the 1980s includes all art forms as well as the traditional ink painting form. See Wang Jianyu 王建玉, 《中国美术批评 (1978-1989)》 [*Art Criticism in China: 1978-1989*] (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2017), pp.39-85.

⁸⁷ These periods are defined by Li Xianting in his essays, see Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," in exh cat. *China's New Art, Post 1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993); "中国百年艺术思潮讲演录之八十年代——从后文革到后八九" ["A Hundred Years of Art Trends in China: from post-Cultural Revolution to Post-1989"], a lecture presented at Yunnan University, 18 November 2006. (<http://art.china.cn/huodong/2010-05/20/content_3521496_2.htm>, viewed 02 June 2011.) In recent years, art historians and critics in China have debated how to define the timeframes between major art trends and have held various forums to reach a consensus. See in Lu Hong, "'八五新潮'与中国当代美术史写作" ['85 Art New Wave' and Historiography on Contemporary Chinese Art] English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. <<http://blog.artintern.net/article/233960>>, viewed on 12 February 2012.

⁸⁸ See the details of this debate in Gao Minglu, et al., 《中国当代美术史, 1985-1986》 [*The Contemporary Chinese Art History, 1985-1986*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1991), and in the second edition of this book Gao Minglu, et al. *'85 Movement* (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University, 2008), pp.70-72.

⁸⁹ Another expression was "sent up to the mountain and down to the countryside" ("上山下乡").

experiences became the dominant subject of critical review in literature and the arts during the period from 1978 to 1983. Shanghai was the forerunner in this “Scar” phenomenon. The Scar Art, together with the Native Soil Art trend, was an important transition from socialist realism and the forms of political art prevailing during the Cultural Revolution. Based on Lu’s novel, a comic series *Scar* co-created by three artists from Shanghai, Chen Yiming 陈宜明, Liu Yulian 刘宇廉, and Li Bin 李斌, was published in *Comic Magazine* 《连环画报》 later in the same year. (Figure 6.) In the following year they co-produced another comic series *Maple* 《枫》 published in the same magazine which led to a chain reaction in the arts sphere. Similar to Scar Art, the Native Soil Art trend was aimed at deviating from the political model of mainstream socialist realism and Mao-era art.⁹⁰ This was exemplified by another Sichuan artist Luo Zhongli’s 罗中立 oil painting *Father* (父亲) (Figure 8.) and

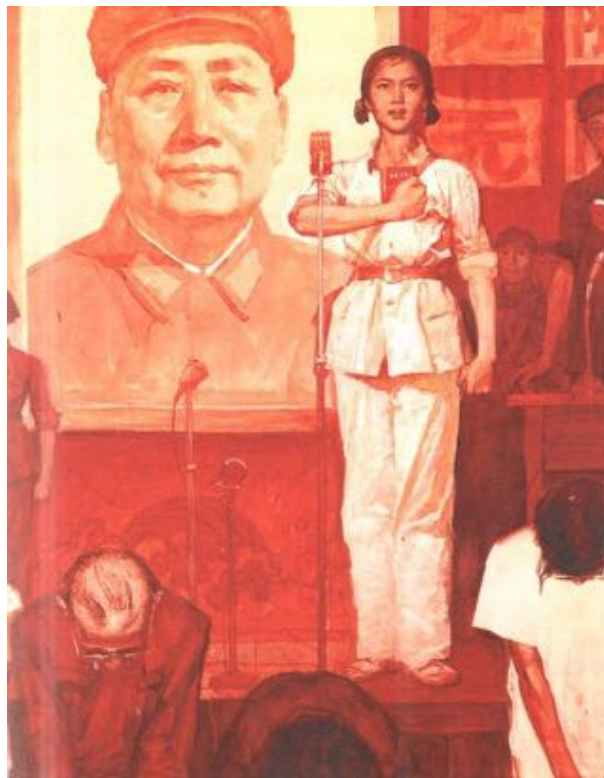


Figure 6. An image from the comic series *Maple* 《枫》 published in *Comic Magazine* 《连环画报》, August 1979.

⁹⁰ “Mao-era art” is a general term used in China denoting art production during Mao Zedong’s regime and under his ideological dictums since 1949, and especially during the Cultural Revolution.



Figure 7. Chen Danqing, *Entering the City, No.2* 《进城之二》 (Tibetan Series), 1979. Oil on canvas.



Figure 8. Luo Zhongli, *Father* 《父亲》, 1980. Oil on canvas

Shanghai artist Chen Danqing's 陈丹青 *Tibetan Series* (西藏组画).⁹¹ (Figure 7.) The earlier work of Cheng Conglin 程丛林 and later works of Lou and Chen represented a progression from the style of social realism to that of realism.⁹²

The debate led by the artist Wu Guanzhong has been recognised as the first public debate on art after the Cultural Revolution, and took place concurrently with the art developments mentioned above. Wu's essay challenged the official dictum that "content determines form" (内容决定形式) and encouraged artists to explore "abstract beauty" (抽象美) in art. Many professional artists, critics, and theorists participated in the debate through discussions on subjects such as the aesthetics of form, decorative aesthetics, and art

⁹¹ The Native Soil art trend which emerged in the early 1980s was led by artists who had been "sent down to the countryside" during the Cultural Revolution. Their works focused on the ordinary people from the countryside and their lives including ethnic minorities and ordinary heroes, such as Luo Zhongli's oil painting *Father* and Chen Danqing's *Tibetan series*. See detailed discussion in Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art"; Gao Minglu, et al. *'85 Movement* pp.54-64. Chen Danqing was born in Shanghai in 1953, entered post-graduate study at CAFA in 1978 and graduated in 1980. He then went to United States in 1982 and returned to China in 2000 as a professor at Qinghua University's School of Art and Design in Beijing. He resigned in 2005 advocating changes to the art education system in China. He now works independently as an art critic and commentator on issues related to art and art education in China.

⁹² See discussion on the differences between socialist realism, social realism and realism in Introduction footnote 56.

tendencies. It was noted by some critics that this debate was provoked by artists to supplant the conservative art theoretical discourse in China's art world at that time.⁹³ The debate soon spread throughout the country but was interrupted by the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in late 1983.⁹⁴

The evolution of avant-garde art in China gained momentum from activities generated by artists and critics during 1985 and 1986. There were four important events in the art discourse in this period: The Art of Oil Painting Conference (“油画艺术讨论会”) in Jing county 泾县, Anhui 安徽 province in April 1985;⁹⁵ National Art of Oil Painting Conference in Beijing in April 1986; the '85 Youth Art Trends Large-scale Slideshow and Academic Symposium ('85 青年美术思潮大型幻灯展暨学术讨论会) in Zhuhai 珠海 city (later called Zhuhai Meeting [珠海会议]) in August 1986; and the '88 Chinese Modern Art Creativities Research Conference ('88 中国现代艺术创作研讨会), also known as the Huangshan Conference (黄山会议) in Huangshan City in November 1988.⁹⁶ The papers and discussions at the first Huangshan conference in 1985 criticised the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign and the Cultural Revolution art concepts reflected in the Sixth National Fine Art Exhibition.⁹⁷ Discussions concentrated on four topics: first, advocating for the style and aesthetics of art and completely repudiating the concept that “content determines form” in art production and art in the service of politics; second, criticism on the “nationalisation of oil painting”;

⁹³ Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.70.

⁹⁴ The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was a short-lived political campaign (October-December 1983) that aimed to stop Western liberal ideas influencing the population as a result of the economic reforms. See an in-depth discussion on the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, pp.233-237.

⁹⁵ The Art of Oil Painting Conference was known also as the Huangshan Meeting (黄山会议). It was initiated by Zhang Zuyin 张祖英, organised by the Research Institute of Fine Art and the China Arts Research Academy 中国艺术研究院美术研究所 CARA-RIFA (current name Chinese National Academy of Arts, CNAA) and China Artists Association Anhui Branch (CAAAB), supported by the CAFA and the Beijing Fine Art Academy (北京画院). Zhang Zuyin was the member of CARA-RIFA. Further information on the idea for this conference can be found in an interview between journalist Jie Shuzhi 解淑智 and the conference key organiser Zhang Zuyin 张祖英 which provides detailed background information on this conference (See Zhang Zuyin, An Interview: “The Ins and Outs of Huangshan Conference” <https://zhangzuying.artron.net/news_detail_1043967>, viewed 06/10/2013); also see in *Chinese Oil Painting* no.6 (2010) (《中国油画》2010年第6期).

⁹⁶ There have been many articles and research papers on these four conferences in China produced over the last 15 years. The information and discussions on this topic are based on my interviews with the artists as well as Gao and his co-authors' publication *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*.

⁹⁷ The Sixth National Fine Art Exhibition (第六届全国美展) opened on 1 October 1984 to commemorate the 35th Anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and was jointly organised by the Ministry of Culture and the China Artists Association. The artworks re-embraced the Party's doctrine of art serving politics. See in Fei Dawei 费大为, “中央美术学院师生关于第六届全国美展座谈纪要”[“Summary of discussions between teachers and students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts on the Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition”], 《美术思潮》[*The Trend of Art Thought*], 1985: no.1,11-12,16; Gao Minglu, *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.72-75.

third, liberating individual expression; fourth, on modernist art and modernism. In April 1986, the newly established (October 1985) China Artists Association Oil Painting Subcommittee convened the National Art of Oil Painting Conference (全国油画艺术讨论会) in Beijing in 1986. This official conference invited the new wave art activists including critics Gao Minglu and Zhu Qingsheng and representative artists such as Shu Qun 舒群, Zhang Peili 张培力, and Li Shan.⁹⁸ In this conference, three major papers by Gao Minglu, Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生, and Shui Tianzhong 水天中 were presented and became the centre of discussions.⁹⁹ To keep up the momentum generated from this meeting, a core group of activists including Li Shan, Su Qun, Zhang Peili, Wang Guangyi 王广义 and others led by Gao Minglu organised a follow-up event, the Zhuhai Symposium, in 1986.¹⁰⁰ The timing of this symposium was critical as it was held at the height of the new wave art movement and therefore attracted the participation of many activists in new wave art from around the country. It was intended to build a platform for an exchange of ideas and to consolidate information about art productions in the country and to evaluate new wave art and related activities.¹⁰¹ It generated a strong collective synergy in new wave art in the mid-1980s. An exhibition of original works of contemporary art was subsequently planned for July 1987 at the Beijing Agricultural Exhibition Centre but was postponed due to the Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalisation of the same year.¹⁰² The group of artists and critics that made up the core

⁹⁸ For a further discussion on Li Shan's participation in this conference see Chapter 4 under the subheading "The Role in '85 Art New Wave Movement: Events and Art Exhibitions".

⁹⁹ The three papers were "'85 Art Movement" ("85 美术运动") by Gao Minglu; "Viewing Contemporary Western Art World from Distance" (当代西方画坛隔岸观) by Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生; and "The Impact of Western Art trends on Chinese Oil Painting" ("西方美术思潮冲击下的中国油画" by Shui Tianzhong. These papers were presented with slide images and provided recent surveys from Western art trends after World War II to the contemporary era and the impact on Chinese modern oil painting, especially on the recent art from young artists in China. Gao's paper for the first time described the new wave art after the Sixth National Art Exhibition (第六届全国美展) as the '85 Art Movement. This article has been translated in English in MoMA's publication. See Gao Minglu, "'85 Art Movement (1986)," *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), pp.52-61. Also see Zhu Qingsheng, "Viewing Contemporary Western Art World from Distance" (当代西方画坛隔岸观) in 《艺术研究》 [*Art Research*] no.4 (1986), 47-56.

¹⁰⁰ The initiators of this event were young critics and artists who were invited to the National Art of Oil Painting Conference in Beijing. The Zhuhai Painting Institute and the *Fine Art in China* (中国美术报) weekly newspaper were the formal organisers for this event. The Zhuhai Meeting adopted the form of a slideshow as an effective medium of communication for showing contemporary art activities from different regions. A selection committee was formed by the representatives from the organiser institutions, artist groups and independent artists from the regions, young art critics, and editors of art magazines and newspapers. Three hundred and forty-two slides of contemporary artists' works were selected and screened during this symposium.

¹⁰¹ Gao Minglu, '85 Movement: *The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.322-326.

¹⁰² See in "1989 China/Avant-garde Exhibition," Asia Art Archive. <<https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/1989-china-avant-garde-exhibition>>, viewed 18 February 2019. Bourgeois Liberalisation was defined at the CCP plenum in September 1986 as "negating the socialist system in favour of capitalism." See Colin Mackerras, *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* ed. Edward L. Davis (London and New York: Routledge 2005).

group from the Zhuhai Symposium once again collaborated with the art institutions CARA-RIFA and CAAAB to organise the Huangshan Conference in November 1988. Over a hundred young artists and theorists attended and participated in discussions about art activities and to review the art discourse, with an agenda to mount a national contemporary art exhibition at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing. In an effort to stage an exhibition of the nation's contemporary art, the core group of young artists and critics succeeded in organising and mounting the *China/Avant-garde Exhibition* at NAMOC in February 1989.¹⁰³ It has been seen as the conclusion of the '85 Movement and a turning point reflecting a departure from the idealistic Chinese avant-garde art movement that had emerged in the 1980s.¹⁰⁴

The nomenclatures '85 Art New Wave and '85 Movement often used as umbrella terms to represent transformations in Chinese contemporary art in the 1980s, I argue, are problematic.¹⁰⁵ The use of these terms in this thesis adheres to their original meaning in the

¹⁰³ The 1989 *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in NAMOC was a historically significant event initiated by artists and critics. It was a comprehensive showcase of experimental artworks that emerged in mainland China after 1985. The exhibition included over 186 artists and approximately 300 artworks in various art forms ranging from painting, installation, conceptual art, and performance art. The exhibition opened on 5 February 1989 and was temporarily shut down twice during its fifteen-day display caused by the controversial conceptual actions and performances and attracted a lot of media attention both in China and abroad. For example, Xiao Lu 肖鲁 and Tang Song's 唐宋 impromptu performance used a loaded handgun to shoot Xiao Lu's artwork called *Dialogue* that caused an immediate closing of the show that had only been open for two hours (See further discussion in Chapter 4, footnote 651.); Wu Shanzhuan 吴山专 in his work called *Big Business* sold frozen shrimp in a makeshift market stand; Li Shan's performance piece was washing his feet in a plastic bowl imprinted with images of international political figures such as Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev; and an anonymous artist sent a "Bomb Threat" letter to the Museum office, etc. The preparatory committee members included: Gan Yang 甘阳, Zhang Yaojun 张耀军, Liu Dong 刘东, Liu Xiaochun 刘骁纯, Zhang Zuying 张祖英, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Tang Qingnian 唐庆年, Yang Lihua 杨丽华, Zhou Yan 周彦, Fan Di'an 范迪安, Wang Mingxian 王明贤, Kong Chang'an 孔长安, Fei Dawei and Hou Hanru 侯瀚如.

¹⁰⁴ There have been numerous publications and interviews with participating artists and critics, discussions and symposiums recording papers in relation to the China/Avant-garde exhibition that have been produced in print or online in recent years. Comprehensive documentation related to this subject has been compiled by the Hong Kong-based Asia Art Archive (AAA) and are available online. < www.china1980s.org > The recent MoMA publication in collaboration with AAA dedicated a section to this subject. See in Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: 2010). 113-132.

¹⁰⁵ In a recent interview (2018), a prominent art historian Shui Tianzhong commented: "The '85 Art New Wave' was originally put forward by Gao Minglu. But in fact, I think the '85 Art New Wave' is one of the many phenomena in the domestic art circles in that decade. For example, like 'Stars Art Exhibition,' you can't include it in the '85 Art New Wave,' because people who participate, or the goals they want to strive for, are different. They mainly want to strive for the political right to engage in artistic activities legally under the Constitution." See Shui Tianzhong, Qin Yunjia 秦韵佳, "An Exclusive Interview with Shui Tianzhong: Art Research Requires Historical Perspective and Humanistic Feelings" ["专访水天中: 美术研究需要历史眼光与人文情怀"], in *Art Observation* 11 (2018): 29-32. Original Chinese text: "'85 新潮'最初是高名潞提出来的。但是实际上, 我觉

avant-garde art movement in China in the period from 1985 to 1986. The period of avant-garde art activities from 1985 to 1986 so called '85 Art New Wave ('85 新潮美术) was the dominant subject that occupied the art discourse in China in the second half of the 1980s. Critics have described it as the first nationwide avant-garde movement in twentieth-century Chinese art history. Gao Minglu and co-authors noted "around the mid-1980s, about 100 self-organised art groups simultaneously emerged in the all provinces in China, it turned [into] a storm wave which has profoundly influenced the Chinese contemporary art in the last two decades."¹⁰⁶ It has also been viewed as a "mass movement" (群众运动) or a "collective movement" (群体运动) generated by the artists' vigorous activities and the vibrant art criticism led by a group of young critics. The participants in this art movement were largely artists from various art academies and colleges who organised themselves into groups, some of which were joined by poets, writers, and philosophers. The terms '85 Art New Wave and '85 Art Movement to describe avant-garde art activities in China first appeared in articles published in 1986 by Gao Minglu and Li Xianting to represent the period 1985-1986 and subsequently used by other writers in the 1990s to reflect the new directions in contemporary Chinese art.¹⁰⁷ However, my research has found that the use of these terms by writers in China often refers to the whole decade of the 1980s rather than the defined period 1985-1986. The generalisation of these terms distorts the understanding of the chronological development of avant-garde art and the pivotal role Shanghai had from the late 1970s.¹⁰⁸ This issue will be discussed further in this chapter.

得'85 新潮'是那十年里国内美术界出现好多现象中的一种现象。比如像'星星美展', 不能把它纳入到'85 新潮' 里面去, 因为不管是参加的人, 或者是他们要争取的目标, 都是不一样的, 他们主要是要争取宪法之下的合法从事艺术活动的政治权利。" Shui Tianzhong, former director of the Fine Art Research Institute, Chinese National Academy of Arts; Researcher. (中国艺术研究院美术研究所原所长、研究员), <http://www.zgysyjj.org.cn/118/118_1.html>, viewed 12 March 2019. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

¹⁰⁶ Gao Minglu, et al., "Back cover text," *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*.

¹⁰⁷ See Gao Minglu, "85 美术运动 [The 85 Art Movement]," in 《美术通讯》 [*Artists Newsletter*] no.4 (1986); Li Jiatun [pseud. Li Xianting], "重要的不是艺术 [The Significance Is Not The Art]," in 《中国美术报》 [*Fine Arts in China*], 14 July 1986 (no.28), 1-2; Li Jiatun, [pseud. Li Xianting], "The Significance Is Not The Art," *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung, trans. Kristen Loring (New York: MoMA, 2010), pp.62-63.

¹⁰⁸ In an interview published in *Art World* magazine in 2005, Gao Minglu claimed that he coined the term '85 Art Movement in 1985 and that he "always thought 'movement' is more appropriate", referring to Renato Poggioli's definition of avant-garde art in the book *The theory of the avant-garde* (1968). (See in Liu Libin, "与高名潞的对话," 《艺术世界》, 2005 年第 1 期 ["A Dialogue with Gao Minglu," in *Art World* no.1 (2005). <<http://review.artintern.net/html.php?id=4761&page=0>>, viewed on 24 February 2016. In this thesis, both terms "'85 Art New Wave" and "'85 Movement" are used according to the context of discussions.

The critic Li Xianting pointed out in a lecture in 2010 that in “the modern art movements in China, each period was related to the information coming from abroad.”¹⁰⁹ In the mid-1980s, information and publications on Western modern and postmodern art were accessible from art institutions and there were many translations of modern Western philosophers’ theories published in the public domain with the most consumed writings including those by Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Albert Camus, and Jürgen Habermas. To capture the Western influences, Gao and his co-authors characterised contemporary Chinese art in the mid-1980s as the “Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde.”¹¹⁰ In their memoirs and essays, artists and critics active at that time mention the significant influence of American artist Robert Rauschenberg’s solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in late 1985. According to reports, “the exhibition attracted some 300,000 visitors over 18 days and its impact was profound.”¹¹¹ The dada/pop art language in his art and the mixing of traditional techniques with ready-made or found materials attracted many Chinese artists from all over the country to visit the capital. The critics in Beijing also responded enthusiastically.¹¹²

The views of participating critics in the ’85 Art New Wave activities were more influential than those of other art writers in China during this period.¹¹³ One of the power engines for turning the ’85 Art New Wave activities into a movement was a group of young art critics who studied at CAFA and the Chinese National Academy of Arts (formerly the Research Institute of Fine Art and the China Arts Research Academy 中国艺术研究院美术研

¹⁰⁹ Li Xianting, “Lecture on the 1980s from a Hundred Years of Art Trends in China – from post-Cultural Revolution to Post-1989”, <http://art.china.cn/huodong/2010-05/20/content_3521496_2.htm>, viewed 02 June 2014. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

¹¹⁰ *The ’85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* is the title of the revised edition published in 2008. The first edition published in 1991 is titled *The Contemporary Art History: 1985-1986*. In the revised edition, Gao and his co-authors did not provide a definition for the use of the English term “enlightenment” [启蒙运动]. The title of the revised edition in Chinese did not use the equivalent word as Enlightenment. It reads: ’85 美术运动: 80 年代的人文前卫, which translates literally as ’85 Art Movement: 1980’s Avant-garde in the [Chinese] humanities. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the definition of the word “enlightenment” as “the action of enlightening or the state of being enlightened” and “the action or state of attaining or having attained spiritual knowledge or insight.” In my understanding, Gao and his co-authors used this word to characterise the Western influences of the intellectual process in Chinese avant-garde art in the 1980s.

¹¹¹ Claire Roberts, “Robert Rauschenberg returns to China,” in Financial Times (International Edition/Online), 01 August 2016, <<https://www.ft.com/content/0d96a9ce-5281-11e6-9664-e0bdc13c3bef>>, viewed 18 February 2019.

¹¹² See Zhu Ye, “Beijing Theorists’ Reactions to the Art of Robert Rauschenberg (1985),” *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung, pp.42-45.

¹¹³ Examples of views on the art of the mid-1980s reflecting theoretical agendas can be seen in: Li Xianting, “The Significance Is Not The Art” and “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art;” Gao Minglu, et al. *The Contemporary Chinese Art History: 1985-1986*; Lü Peng and Yi Dan, 《中国现代艺术史 1979-1989》 [A History of Chinese contemporary art, 1979-1989] (Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Publishing House, 1992).

究院). These art critics were working in influential positions as editors in the nation's major art magazines and periodicals, as well as in important art schools and art institutions in Beijing and other major cities.¹¹⁴ They played significant roles in the movement as activists, theoretical proponents, organisers of activities, and writers.¹¹⁵ The most conspicuous exponent among this group was Li Xianting, former editor of *Meishu* 美术 (*Fine Art*) magazine, whose essays such as "The Significance Is Not The Art" ("重要的不是艺术") published in *Fine Arts in China* provoked the debate on the relationship between art and politics that remains relevant even in contemporary Chinese art discourse today.¹¹⁶

There are two main schools of writing that shaped the perceptions of contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s. One school took a theoretical approach led by Gao Minglu with the seminal publication *The Contemporary Chinese Art History 1985-1986* (中国当代美术史 1985-1986) (1991) and the revised edition '85 Art Movement: vol.1, *The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*; '85 Art Movement: vol.2, *An Anthology of Historical Sources*. The other school pursued an historical approach exemplified by the publications such as *A History of Modern Chinese Art, 1979-1989* (中国现代艺术史 1979-1989) (1992) by Lü Peng 吕澎 and Yi Dan 易丹 and the essay "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art" (1993) by Li Xianting in the catalogue of the exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989* organised by Hanart-TZ Gallery in Hong Kong. Based on these key writings, a consolidated summary from different schools was generated in the production of the recent publication *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (MoMA, 2010). According to Wu Hung 巫鸿, "although the contemporary critics held different opinions about the nature and merits of the '85 Art New Wave, most of them theorised it as a delayed modernization movement, which aimed to reintroduce humanism and rationalism into the nation's consciousness."¹¹⁷

Avant-garde art from 1987 to 1989 was in a transition period as artists repositioned themselves in the international art context. This period has been referred to as part of the '85 Movement by influential art critics. The artistic language of those artists entered into postmodern art with a common tendency "to abandon a grand socio-political vision and to relocate the meaning of art in the creative process and experience" as Wu Hung further

¹¹⁴ There is an absence of a similar group in Shanghai. One reason could be the art education infrastructure as noted in the Introduction. Shanghai did not have an art academy after 1949 or art criticism courses offered from art education institutions to produce academically-trained young art critics. This is discussed later in the chapter.

¹¹⁵ The key players were Gao Minglu, Li Xianting, Liu Xiaochun, Peng De, Pi Daojian, and later joined by younger critics Fei Dawei and Hou Hanru. Their writings are discussed or referenced in this thesis where relevant.

¹¹⁶ For an English translation of Li's essay (written under the pseudonym Li Jiaturun) see in Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, p.62.

¹¹⁷ See in Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, p.51.

stated.¹¹⁸ This transition was exemplified by Gu Wenda 谷文达 and Wu Shanzhuan's 吴山专 experimental installation works in Chinese characters (1985-1988), Xu Bing's 徐冰 *A Book from the Sky* (1987-91) with thousands of fake Chinese characters, and Huang Yongping's 黄永砵 *The History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987), an installation where the artist collected two art history books—Herbert Read's *A Concise History of Modern Painting* and Wang Bomin's *History of Chinese Painting*—and washed them in a washing machine.¹¹⁹

At the end of 1986, the Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalisation was launched to oppose Western capitalism and to reinforce the Party's authority.¹²⁰ The political campaign was reminiscent of earlier political campaigns and movements including the Cultural Revolution which left deep negative experiences on the population. The term “movement” (*yundong* 运动) either in a social or political context, had close associations with China's modern and contemporary political history, and together with “collectivism” was part of the CCP's ideology. The use of the term “movement” by writers to define and promote avant-garde art activities in the mid 1980s, I argue, reflects their own social and cultural agenda.¹²¹ The changing political conditions made some artists and critics rethink the nature of the '85 Art New Wave movement. Wu Hung made the following observations on the '85 Art New Wave.

The persistence of a movement/*yundong* mentality was clearly visible in the '85 Art New Wave: while attacking official ideology and art policies, its advocates tried hard to galvanize avant-garde artists into a unified front and to develop contemporary art into an organized “movement.” In fact, they called such collective activities a *yundong*.¹²²

On the rethinking of the '85 Art New Wave, Wu continues as follows:

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* p.99.

¹¹⁹ Wenda Gu showed one of his early mixed media woven installation work “hes x shes” (1986) (300cm x 600cm x 80cm) made of silk, cotton, wool, hemp, gloves, bamboo, ink, rice paper, weaving, traditional mounting, and ink, in a group exhibition *China Contemporary Tapestry* at the Shanghai Exhibition Centre in 1987. Wu Shanzhuan started to experiment with conceptual art using language and pseudo-text from Chinese characters and together with another two artists produced an installation work titled “Red Humour International” (1986) in Zhejiang province and documented by artists themselves with an intention to show in public. Xu Bing first publicly exhibited his work *A Book from the Sky* in the National Art Museum of China in 1988. Huang Yongping first exhibited the work *The History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987) in the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in Beijing in 1989. In this thesis, the case studies will reflect those artists' relationship to the '85 Movement in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

¹²⁰ See previous footnote 102.

¹²¹ See Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, p.99.

¹²² See in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, p.99.

As it continued to develop in 1986 and 1987, it also produced internal opposition: Some avant-garde artists and critics made an increasing effort to free artistic creation from collective activities motivated by socio-political goals. They argued that it was wrong to use art as a practical tool in any kind of social revolution, and that the true value of modern art resided in its intrinsic creativity and spirituality. They criticized the New Wave movement for its lack of artistic standards and art historical vision, for its indulgence in pseudo philosophical discourse, and for its uncritical borrowing of modern Western styles. Some critics encouraged artists to purify artistic language; others envisioned a modern Chinese art that combined Western modernism with Chinese cultural traditions.¹²³

In contrast to the discourse on avant-garde art nationally, the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the 1980s presented a different perspective on the discourse. In the Introduction, I have described this as “studio discourse.”¹²⁴ My personal experience and my research confirm that there were only a few art critics and theorists writing, supporting or debating avant-garde art in the local public media in Shanghai during the early 1980s. Among them was the literary critic Wu Liang 吴亮, who had been interacting with the avant-garde artists from the beginning of the 1980s and wrote first-hand accounts about the art of Zhang Jianjun and other artists such as Chen Zhen and Hu Xiangcheng 胡项城 that were published through local newspapers from 1983 onwards.¹²⁵

Politically, the Party had learned from the experiences of the early 1920s in using publishing and media as tools to disseminate the Communist Party’s ideology during the Republican era. At that time Shanghai was the centre for publishing and media industries that enjoyed relative freedom and was an environment to produce materials to interpret or discuss political ideas. During the Mao era, however, Shanghai was deemed a “major disaster area” (重灾区) in political terms and portrayed as impaired by imperialism,

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ See in Introduction under the subheading “Shanghai at the forefront of avant-garde art in China in the 1980s.”

¹²⁵ This statement is based on my many discussions and recorded interviews over the years with Shanghai artists from the 1980s, and important evidential material from AAA’s interview with Wu Liang, see: <www.china1980s.org/files/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=76> (viewed 07 August 2010) with a transcript in Chinese. Wu Liang is a personal friend, and his friendship with Shanghai avant-garde artists in the 1980s are documented in his book of short stories in Chinese 《画室中的画家》 [*Artist in Studio*] (Shanghai: Sanlian Book Store, 1997), 《艺术在上海》 [*Art in Shanghai*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Meishu Publishing House, 2002); as well as in the Interview recorded by AAA accessible online. Later, journalists such as Huang Shi 黄石 from the *Shanghai Cultural and Arts Newspaper* (上海文化艺术报) and Li Jian 李坚 from the *Shanghai Xinmin Evening News* (上海新民晚报) also started reporting on avant-garde art activities, where generally all articles had to pass the official censorship. However, it was not until the late 1980s that young writers such as Hu Jianping 胡建平, Xu Hong 徐虹, and Li Xu 李旭 emerged in the circle of avant-garde art discussions.

capitalism and corrupted by bourgeois decadence. The media and publishing industries in Shanghai were strictly controlled by the Party's propaganda department in the city governance body and, from time to time, Mao used Shanghai as a launching pad for political campaigns to attack his political opponents within the Party.¹²⁶ The term "Literary Inquisition" (文字狱), or literally "imprisonment due to writings", is a traditional Chinese term which refers to official persecution of intellectuals for their writings.¹²⁷ In China's modern political history, the use of "literary inquisition" was at its peak during the Cultural Revolution in order to retain Party control over all writings. The actions exercised by the Gang of Four, part of Mao's close circle of comrades, and how they gained extreme political power are linked closely to Shanghai. The Gang of Four through their power and influence inflicted terrible suffering on the population of intellectuals in China, especially in Shanghai, and diminished the reputation of Shanghai intellectuals nationwide by suppressing the local intelligentsia on the one hand while presenting themselves as Mao's loyalists on the other. After surviving numerous political movements, campaigns and purges, especially the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai intellectuals in the late 1970s and early 1980s continued to experience the Party's tight grip on cultural productions. Printing production in any form needed official approval. According to a local writer Wu Liang, it was difficult for him to have his articles published in China at that time and he could only get published by using a short story format in the newspaper.¹²⁸

Socially and culturally, intellectual freedom of expression and discussion in public platforms remained restricted limiting communication channels among the intellectuals in Shanghai.¹²⁹ Mutual support was shown in another form by artists exhibiting their work together, wherever possible, when the political climate became comparatively more relaxed.

¹²⁶ See an in-depth discussion on the political relationship between Shanghai and the central government in Beijing during the Mao era in Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*, pp.367-406.

¹²⁷ The "Literary Inquisition" (文字狱) has a long history in China. It was traditionally used by autocratic rulers to remove political opponents or different ideas. A writer could be persecuted even for a single phrase or word in his or her writing which the ruler considered offensive. The Qing dynasty was particularly notorious for such a practice. During the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four used this practice as a tool against their political opponents.

¹²⁸ Interview with Wu Liang, Asia Art Archive (An interview transcript available in Chinese), <www.china1980s.org/files/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=76>, viewed 03 March 2015. Wu became a professional writer and joined the Shanghai Writer's Association in 1985. His interests included literary and art criticism and his short articles on Shanghai avant-garde artists published in the 1980s have been widely quoted by art critics and historians.

¹²⁹ This aspect will be examined further through the artist's case studies Chapters 3, 4, and 5. As I have argued earlier active communication and the exchange of ideas or support between avant-garde artists, artists with writers, and artists with contemporary intellectuals from other fields were conducted very much on an individual level and in private, but not in isolation. In Shanghai communication and exchange of ideas through the creative processes of artists was expressed in visual languages rather than in commentaries by critics.

During the 1980s avant-garde artists in Shanghai often acted as curators in making exhibitions as will be discussed later in this chapter. This phenomenon is described by Biljana Ciric as “exhibition-making” whereby she considers the importance of “reconsidering exhibition rituals” as an “aspect of artistic practice.”¹³⁰ While Ciric makes an important point, in this thesis I would argue differently, that is, “studio discourse” enabled artists to act as art critics and curators using exhibitions with visual content rather than writing texts on the art discourse.¹³¹ These artists were cognisant that they should not be identified as a collective group, but rather retain their individual stance even if they exhibited together.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution Shanghai still did not have comprehensive art training institutions, and consequently there was a lack of trained young art critics in the late 1970s and the 1980s. This dearth of art theory and art criticism education programmes compared to programmes offered at CAFA in Beijing and the Zhejiang Fine Art Academy (currently China Academy of Art) (CAA) in Hangzhou meant that Shanghai did not engage in the vigorous contemporary art discourse generated by well-trained young art critics from other places.¹³² Though there was an absence of an art academy in Shanghai to confer

¹³⁰ Biljana Ciric, ed. “Introduction,” in *A History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979-2006* (Manchester: UK Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014), pp.2, 5. Biljana Ciric is an independent curator currently living and working in Shanghai. Her research works have been of an archival nature rather than in-depth analyses with the focuses of curatorial and exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art in Shanghai, which are a useful source in providing factual listings of events and interviews with artists.

¹³¹ Examples of “studio discourse” can be found in the interactions between the artists themselves and with writers, such as between Zhang Jianjun and the writer Wu Liang who had been introduced by the artist Pan Qiming 潘奇明. Zhang has described their close friendship from the 1980s when he worked as an entry ticket collector at the Shanghai Art Museum and Wu was a young self-taught writer who worked in a nearby factory. (Zhang’s position as the Museum’s entry ticket collector will be discussed in Chapter 3.) Wu had a great interest in and an intuitive appreciation of art and visited Zhang’s studio regularly inside the Museum where they would have wide-ranging conversations or often Wu just watched Zhang making his art. Wu had a similar friendship with other Shanghai artists including Li Shan and this will be discussed in Chapter 4. [Zhang Jianjun, interview with Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 November 2004); Wu Liang, interview with Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 02 March 2005.)]

¹³² This situation applied only to the visual art area. Literature, film and theatre disciplines had theoretical studies including modern and contemporary criticism programmes within educational institutions in Shanghai. In the Introduction I discussed Shanghai’s advanced art industry and the example of the Shanghai Fine Art College (SFAC) in leading modern art education in the first half of the twentieth century. (See in Introduction in the section under the headline “Shanghai at the forefront of avant-garde art in China in the 1980s.”) After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the SFAC became a public art academy. In 1952, it merged with the Suzhou Art College and the Art Department of Shandong University into the East China Art College. It was subsequently relocated first to Wuxi 无锡 then to Nanjing 南京 as the Nanjing Fine Art Academy. Shanghai had no formal art academy until December 2016. The new Shanghai Fine Art College, re-established firstly as the Shanghai Fine Art School in March 1959, was upgraded to Shanghai Fine Art College in September 1960 but did not have the same status under the education system as the art academies in Beijing and other cities. The programmes offered were mostly in professional art practice training. They then merged

formal academic degrees it did not limit the city's capacity for artistic training of the highest standard. Commentators have noted that without the constraints of a formal art academy bound to official art education directions Shanghai was able to preserve the modernist legacy in art training and practice.¹³³

Under the conditions of a strictly controlled media and publishing industry in Shanghai, an underground art magazine called *Visual Art* 《视觉艺术》 emerged in the avant-garde art circle in 1987 but was to last only one edition before it disappeared.¹³⁴ It was produced by a group of artists, writers, and poets who compiled a collection of eight essays on eight artists including the writings of Wu Liang, Xu Hong and other writers with pen names.¹³⁵ It also included three artists' statements from Chen Zhen, Yu Youhan, and Qin Yifeng 秦一峰. Among those writings, Chen Zhen's critique, which I will discuss in depth in Chapter 6, displayed deep intellectual capacity and expressed his decisive views on individual and group consciousness.¹³⁶ The articles in this magazine have become an important source for art critics writing about the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in this period. For example, in the publication of *The Chinese Contemporary Art History, 1985-1986* by Gao Minglu and his co-authors (1991), *Visual Art* was noted and quoted including analyses from articles on the art

with the newly established Shanghai University as the Fine Art College in 1983. In December 2016, the Fine Art College formally changed its name to Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts and expanded its programmes, not only in Fine Art, but also in design, architecture, art history and theory studies. (See in Jiang Ying 蒋英, "New and Old Fine Art Colleges: Two Fine Art Colleges in Shanghai History," pp.89-94.) Although the government later created the Shanghai Chinese Painting Institute (SCAI) and the Shanghai Oil Painting and Sculpture Institute (SOPSI) as professional art centres for the production and research of art in line with official cultural policy, neither were institutes of higher education or able to confer academic degrees.

¹³³ In an interview (2008) published in the Shanghai art magazine *Art World*, Fei Dawei commented: "After the liberation in 1949, realist art occupied an important position in the political service in Beijing. The best-preserved place for modernist art in China is in Shanghai. From 1949 to the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai did not establish a fine arts academy, which in turn made Shanghai avoid the control and influence of Soviet art, thus preserving the tradition of Western European modern art." Original Chinese text: "1949 年解放以后, 为政治服务的现实主义艺术在北京占据了重要的地位。而现代主义艺术在中国保存最好的地方就是在上海。从 1949 年到“文革”以后的这段时间里, 上海没有建立美术学院, 这反而使得上海避免了苏俄艺术的控制和影响, 从而保留了西欧现代艺术的传统。" (See in Fei Dawei, "Beijing and Paris are alike- An Interview with Fei Dawei" by Lin Jia, *Art World* 225 (2008).

<http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?biz=MjM5ODcxOTg1Mw==&mid=402329275&idx=1&sn=3021c2c0ec2bd15fabaf5edb2fd77d05&scene=0#wechat_redirect>, viewed 10 January 2016). English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

¹³⁴ I photographed a copy from the private archive of a Shanghai-based artist.

¹³⁵ According to the artist Zhang Jianjun who was close to the key people producing this magazine at the time: Wu Junrong 吴俊荣, editor of this magazine (pen name Taizi), Hu Jianping, a self-taught artist and writer (with a pen name Qian Ping) and Ding Yi, a graduate from the Shanghai Arts and Crafts college. (Email from Zhang Jianjun, 10 May 2016). I read the magazine in Shanghai in 1987.

¹³⁶ Chen Zhen, "Individual and Group Consciousness," pp.32-33.

of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, and Yu Youhan.¹³⁷ However, Chen Zhen's critique was overlooked with no mention of it in Gao's publication, not even in the revised second edition two-volume set printed in late 2008.¹³⁸ Furthermore, this critical piece of writing by Chen Zhen has been overlooked in the art discourse in China until the present day. Chen Zhen's critique, I argue, painted a significant stroke on the canvas of Shanghai's contemporary art discourse. It represented a strong voice of critical debate reflecting ideas from Shanghai that contributed to the national discourse at the time.¹³⁹

The materials examined in the Introduction and in this chapter, illustrate a shift in the art scene of Shanghai between the modernist movement of the early twentieth century and the later avant-garde art movement of the 1980s.¹⁴⁰ The former consisted of various art groups or societies and was charged with passionate manifestos and iconoclastic actions. By contrast, the avant-garde artists of the 1980s held firm to their individualistic and independent stance. Their communications and exchange of ideas on a personal level from artist to artist and artist to writer formed a distinctive Shanghai-style discourse on the Shanghai art scene in the 1980s, which I have referred to as "studio discourse." They used this informal network, disassociated from the collectivist trend in forming art groups that pertained elsewhere in China. Some, such as Zhang Jianjun, took such an extreme position that he abandoned making statements or expressing his ideas in writing. My research finds that this kind of distinctive discourse and creative artistic and intellectual endeavour was led by individual avant-garde artists through self-organised events. Some of these self-organised events in Shanghai presented experimental art practices more advanced than in the rest of the country at that time as I will argue in this thesis. The *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983* in Shanghai is a good example of such an event.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Gao Minglu, et al. *The Chinese Contemporary Art History, 1985-1986*.

¹³⁸ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-garde (Vol.01)*, pp.216-224; Gao Minglu, *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources (Vol.02)*.

¹³⁹ See a detailed discussion of Chen Zhen's critique in Chapter 6 under the subheading "Chen Zhen".

¹⁴⁰ See in Introduction the sections under the headings of "The Modernist Art Movement" and "Shanghai at the forefront of avant-garde art in China in the 1980s." Such a shift displayed how the socio-political changes affected the art scene. Instead of the critics acting as "spokesmen" (代言人) for the artists, the Shanghai avant-garde artists acted on their own principles and with an individual conscience in their creative processes, and, through personal communication and interaction, as critics on one another's work. (AAA's interview with Wu Liang, touched upon the phenomenon of the art critics acting as "spokesmen" for those avant-garde artists and groups in public platforms in other cities during '85 Movement. See in an online link <http://www.china1980s.org/en/interviewdetail.aspx?interview_id=76> with an interview transcript available in Chinese.)

¹⁴¹ The *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983* will be discussed later in this chapter.

Despite the weak local art discourse in the public arena, the Shanghai avant-garde artists' artistic experimentation and their activities in the 1980s have been included in key writings on China's avant-garde art published since the 1990s as I will discuss further in this chapter.¹⁴² In these writings, the works of Shanghai avant-garde artists were often discussed together with works of a later period by artists from other cities to support theoretical arguments thereby obscuring, I suggest, the important role that Shanghai avant-garde artists played within the national context. As a result, the significance of the avant-garde activities in Shanghai in the 1980s, which I argue were often undertaken earlier by the avant-garde artists from Shanghai in the context of national contemporary art developments, has been muted and disguised in writings on the art of this period in China. This displacement in discussing an art trend in a particular period was affected by different paradigms representing different schools of thought. It resulted in neglecting or overriding the critical time factor for the type of art production. Examples of such displacement can be found in three pieces of influential writings, two from the early 1990s, Li Xianting's essay "*The Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art*," Gao Minglu's edited book '*85 Movement*'; and in the most recent book by MoMA in 2010 edited by Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*.¹⁴³

The essay on linear narrative style by Li Xianting, for example, published in 1993 in the exhibition catalogue *China's New Art, Post-1989*, illustrated the 1979-1983 period with a major event and three key art trends: the *Stars* exhibitions; the new formalist movement Scar Art; and Native Soil Painting. The new formalist movement was identified as "an interest in and experimentation with early Western modernist styles such as impressionism, post-impressionism, fauvism, and cubism."¹⁴⁴ The legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai served as the historical context in Li's article. In acknowledging the older generation of modernists from Shanghai, Li argued that with "a renewed interest in and access to Western modernist concepts, this movement ('new formalist movement') naturally came to the fore."¹⁴⁵ Without giving examples of artworks or events from this movement and with no mention of the most important experimental art activities in Shanghai in this period, Li instead identified "another important element" from this

¹⁴² See examples of these key publications as I discuss below.

¹⁴³ I refer to these key writings for an understanding of the reasons and how and where the displacement occurs. See Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-garde*; Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: 2010)

¹⁴⁴ Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," p.XIV. On the "Yunnan School" paintings, see also Joan Lebold Cohen, *Yunnan School: A Renaissance in Chinese Painting* (California: Fingerhut Group Publishers, 1988).

¹⁴⁵ Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," p.XIV.

movement as coming from those artists who “turned their sights to a re-exploration of art in the native Chinese idiom, including traditional ink painting and folk art.”¹⁴⁶ He then went on to provide examples such as the mural paintings (*The Water-Sprinkling Festival – Praise of Life*, 1979) of Beijing-based artists Yuan Yunsheng 袁运生 and Xiao Huixiang 肖辉祥, and the “Yunnan School” of Chinese painting which emerged in 1979 to support his argument. (Figure 9, 10.) However, in this catalogue a section of combined notes and illustration commentaries by Li, he remarked that “The abstract art production in China in the early 1980s was the result of formalism; form and decoration were the wellsprings of these works. At the least they indicated that artists had made a clean break with realism.”¹⁴⁷ In recognising that in China “abstract art reached a height of popularity during 1981-83,” and highlighting his involvement in the discourse at the time, the author again made no mention of the strong abstract art scene in Shanghai in the same period. Li has labelled abstract art in Shanghai as part of the Purified Language movement without recognition of the early works produced in Li Shan’s abstract *Extension* series, Zhang Jianjun’s mixed media abstract works *Being/Non-Being* series, Yu Youhan’s *Circle* series, and Chen Zhen’s *Floating Qi* series. These surprisingly he adduced together with the works of other Shanghai artists produced after 1986 such as Ding Yi 丁乙, Liu Yaping 刘亚平, and Qian Ping 潜平 (Hu Jianping 胡建平). Xu Bing and Gu Wenda’s works were mentioned as examples of the Purified Language movement. The abstract works of Yu Youhan and Ding Yi were described as “part of a 1987 transition” (都属于 1987 年的一种转折).¹⁴⁸



Figure 9. Yuan Yunsheng, *The Water Festival – A Celebration of Life*, 1979. Mural at Beijing’s Capital Airport.



Figure 10. Xiao Huixiang, *Scientific Spring*, 1979. Mural at Beijing’s Capital Airport.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.LXXVI.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.LXXVI. The art of Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan will be discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4.

As a proponent of abstract art in the early 1980s, when he was a young editor (1979 - 1983) of the nation's authoritative art magazine *Meishu*, Li Xianting was responsible in 1983 for a special edition of *Meishu* on abstract art. He was well informed on abstract art and the debates in the discourse. His open support for abstract art however cost him his job as the magazine's editor and he was purged during the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983.¹⁴⁹ Li's views on abstract art changed later and the displacement of Shanghai artists' work in his narrative is explained in his remarks in his 1993 essay:

The development of contemporary Chinese culture, however, is dependent upon shifts in values. Such a shift took place, for example, in the early 1980s. Following this change, experimentation with abstract art became little more than an empty gesture imitating Western models.¹⁵⁰

His thoughts on "shifts in values" were reflected in his approach to the '85 Art New Wave activities and expressed in his controversial article published in 1986 "The Significance Is Not The Art." The article begins with a statement that "the '85 Art Movement' is not an art movement," and then goes on to argue that "[the reason for this is] because China basically lacks the social and cultural background for modern art."¹⁵¹ Comparing the social and economic foundation of Western modern art to Chinese modern art history, he stated:

[...]In China, whether it's the lack of humanism in its feudal tradition or the interference of far left thought following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the recovery of Chinese art is under the political atmosphere of 'bring order out of chaos' and starts from a low philosophical to economic base.¹⁵²

Therefore, the "recovery of art is by no means the engaging of art itself in the revolution of linguistic models, but rather is an ideological liberation movement." Li then concludes that "the '85 Art Movement is the deepening of this ideological liberation movement and not a nascent modern art movement."¹⁵³ The article's title was highly

¹⁴⁹ The reason Li was purged from his position as editor of *Meishu* was public knowledge and recorded in numerous discussions and interviews, articles, and publications. For example, an article on Li Xianting in the *Art Asia Pacific* magazine, see Andrew Cohen, "Off the page: Li Xianting," in *Art Asia Pacific* no.71 Nov/Dec (2010). < <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/71/OffThePageLiXianting>>, viewed 18 February 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," p.LXXVI.

¹⁵¹ Li Jiatun, [pseud. Li Xianting], "The Significance Is Not The Art," in *Fine Arts in China* 28 (1986): 1-2, 1. The original text in Chinese: "因为中国基本上没有现代艺术的社会及文化背景。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

¹⁵² *ibid.* The original text in Chinese was: "然而中国，无论是缺乏人文主义的封建传统，还是建国后极左思潮的干扰的现状，中国艺术的复苏，都是在一个从哲学到经济低层次的拨乱反正的政治气氛中开始的。"

¹⁵³ *ibid.* The original text in Chinese: "艺术复苏并非艺术自身即语言范式的革命，而是一场思想解放运动；" "85 美术运动就是这场思想解放运动的深入，而非新起的现代艺术运动。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

contentious. Critics pointed out that the author only argued his view on the “’85 Art Movement” and left many questions unanswered, such as the central question on the significance of the art in the “’85 Art Movement.”¹⁵⁴ During this debate, the term “’85 Art Movement” was used in a way that included all the avant-garde art activities and trends in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. In response to his critics, Li wrote another article titled “The Times Look Forward to the Big Soul with the Passion of Life” (“时代期待着大灵魂的生命激情”) published in 1988.¹⁵⁵ In this article, Li advocates a kind of artistic spirit which he calls “Big Soul” (大灵魂) to encompass the defining mood of the time and further argues that with this artistic spirit, the desire for, or pursuit of, the new by artists inevitably reflects deep social and political concerns in a time of change in the nation’s system of values. This article and the earlier one, together with Li’s other writings were compiled into a book under the book title *The Significance Is Not The Art* published in 2000.¹⁵⁶ In recent years, many critics have found Li’s “ideological liberation movement” approach in association with collectivism to determine the value of art in the 1980s problematic as it eliminates the concept of the individual artist’s free will.¹⁵⁷

Another example of displacement relating to Shanghai artists also occurred in a manner seemingly defensible in the theoretical paradigm of the publication *The ’85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* (previous title: *The Contemporary Chinese Art History: 1985-1986*) by Gao Minglu and co-authors.¹⁵⁸ The primary focus of the book is on avant-garde art and associated activities in the mid-1980s in China with a purpose to propound these activities as an art movement as distinct from what Li Xianting called an “ideological liberation movement.” However, while the contents of the publication were intended to focus on the 1985-86 period, the author extended the time frame as far back as

¹⁵⁴ See Wu Wei, “The Significance Is Not The Art, or Is the Art,” [重要的不是艺术、又是艺术] <http://www.ysppj.com/shownews.asp?news_id=5563>, viewed on 10 March 2015. Wu Wei (b.1963) is an artist and art commentator. He has been actively participating in the contemporary art discourse in China.

¹⁵⁵ This article was first published in the *Fine Arts in China* weekly newspaper in 1988. See Li Xianting, “时代期待着大灵魂的生命激情,” in *Fine Arts in China* 37 (1988).

¹⁵⁶ Li Xianting, 《重要的不是艺术》 [*The Significance Is Not The Art*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000).

¹⁵⁷ Li’s early writings had a strong influence on the art discourse during the 1980s and 1990s. Since its publication in 2000, the book has led to a new wave of debates on a wide range of issues in China. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I list a few articles as examples on the current unfolding discourse in China. See: Wu Wei, “重要的不是艺术、又是艺术.” <http://www.ysppj.com/shownews.asp?news_id=5563>, viewed on 10 March 2015; Wang Nanming, “策划人的学术性 高名潞与栗宪庭” [“Academic of the Curators: Gao Minglu and Li Xianting”], at <<http://www.arts.tom.com>>, viewed 05 March 2015; Li Xianting: What is Significant? <http://www.tomarts.cn/_d274689421.htm>, viewed 06 March 2015.

¹⁵⁸ The co-authors are Zhou Yan 周彦, Wang Xiaojian 王小箭, Shu Qun 舒群, Wang Mingxian 王明贤, and Tong Dian 童滇.

1976. In doing so, art within this time frame was defined into three thematic sections: “Tide of Rational [Painting]” (“理性之潮”), “Stream of life” (“生命之流”), and “Transcendence and Return – Post ’85 Art New Wave” (“超越回归—后’85的新潮美术”).¹⁵⁹ The Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the 1980s was largely discussed under the rubric of “Tide of Rational [Painting].” The “Tide of Rational [Painting]” was theorised in three categories that accorded “with generally the artistic ideas, works of art and behavioural characteristics:” humanistic rationality, “noumenon” [sic] reason, and rational thinking.¹⁶⁰ Art and related activities in each of those categories were analysed along the theoretical threads in a chronological structure. Discussions mainly revolved around art produced between 1985 and 1986, including works in a series by Shanghai artists reflecting the theme such as Li Shan’s *Extension no.1* (Oil, 1984), Zhang Jianjun’s *Have no.96* (Oil, 1986), Yu Youhan’s *Circle* series (Ink, 1984), and Chen Zhen’s *Floating Qi no.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6* (Oil, 1984). However, the ideas and forms of these series were conceived and produced as early as the beginning of the 1980s as I discuss later in this thesis.¹⁶¹ Therefore, the narrative in this publication fails to provide a full comprehension of and accurate reflection on the process of conceptual and artistic practice of the individual artists within the correct time frame. For readers, it results in a misleading representation of the transformations in contemporary art in China.

In *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, a publication by MoMA, the erroneous chronological displacement of the works has occurred again despite the well-resourced intellectual exploration and enormous research undertaken to produce the volume. The publication was structured chronologically in two parts plus the coda section: part 1) Contemporary art as domestic movement, 1976-1989; part 2) Globalization and a domestic turn, 1990-2000; Coda: Entering the new millennium (2000-2008). Part 1 was divided into three chapters under the headings: I. The Beginning of Contemporary Art: 1979-84; II. The Arrival of an Avant-garde Art Movement: 1985-86; III. From Collectivity to Individual Creativity: 1987-89.¹⁶² In the introduction to Chapter I, and the following section under the subheading “Unofficial Art Groups and Exhibitions,” the significant artist-organised exhibition *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* (January 1979) in Shanghai, the first of its kind after the Cultural Revolution in China, was omitted. The exhibition only receives a passing mention in a sentence, along with other art events in the following section under the subheading “A Debate on ‘Formal Beauty’ and Other Issues.” Such displacement occurred on

¹⁵⁹ Gao, et al., *The ’85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*. English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.152.

¹⁶¹ See details and discussion on the art productions of those artists in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5.

¹⁶² See the contents list in Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), pp. I-V.

another important artist-organised avant-garde show '83 *Periodical Experimental Art Exhibition* in Shanghai (September 1983). It was mentioned in one sentence under a heading "Political and Intellectual Contexts" (in a chapter which covered the period of 1985-1986 with the focus on the '85 Movement or Art New Wave) as an example of contemporary art exhibitions that had been cancelled and criticised during the Anti Spiritual Pollution Campaign, but without a comment or discussion on the experimental artworks in the exhibition. There is in fact no documentation of any exhibitions, artists' statements, illustrations of works of art, or the important texts by local art commentators from the Shanghai avant-garde art scene for the whole of the 1980s in the entire publication.¹⁶³

Such an omission has been recently noted by international art historians and critics in questioning the rationale for the selection of the documents in this publication. For example, by critiquing "the use and definition of the term *contemporary* as it is employed in *Contemporary Chinese Art* to discuss the artistic production of China" in an article titled "The 'Global' Contemporary Art Canon and the Case of China," the art historian Francesca Dal Lago points to a number of omissions in the genres of artistic productions under the definition of the term of contemporary in this anthology. Quoting an editorial statement on the selection of the materials in the volume from the first page as "This volume is not meant to be a comprehensive archive, nor does it provide an interpretative history of contemporary Chinese art," Dal Lago warns:

Despite the editors declared "documentary" nature of its contents, *Contemporary Chinese Art* is indeed an act of interpretation: editors of any anthology must make selections for inclusion, which at least implies what they value or consider as historical benchmarks: and in this case their choices are stamped by MoMA's canonizing approval. It also serves as a validation of the contemporary status of activities that it considers, because of the imprimatur of one of the world's most important modern art institutions.¹⁶⁴

Despite their different thematic agendas, the texts selected for the anthology, I argue, have a common tendency to focus on central power and a national approach to construct the narrative of contemporary Chinese Art. This tendency was especially strong in the narratives on the avant-garde art in the 1980s (often including the late 1970s) with editors from major art publications in China overlooking modes of art or art scenes that were outside their paradigm. As a consequence, the significance of the distinctive qualities and

¹⁶³ See Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

¹⁶⁴ Francesca Dal Lago, "The 'Global' Contemporary Art Canon and the Case of China." *ARTMargins* 3, no. 3 (2014): 77–97. doi:10.1162/ARTM_R_00095.

spirit of individualism exemplified in the avant-garde art from Shanghai in the 1980s has been neglected. This may be due to the political and cultural reality of China at the time and the centralising power mentality of the Party. My analysis of the displacement and omission of significant aspects of avant-garde art from Shanghai in the 1980s in the above commentaries and my research in this thesis has provided clear temporal evidence of earlier developments in the avant-garde art in Shanghai in advance of developments elsewhere and in contrast to where those developments have previously been placed in different key narratives. It is without argument that the avant-garde art movement in China was flourishing vigorously in the period between 1985 and 1986. In this context, I argue that the Shanghai avant-garde artists and their art activities were part of this nationwide art movement (later named the '85 Movement) and made important contributions and played a leading role especially from the beginning of the 1980s and the years leading to the mid-1980s. However, it was when the movement began to show a collective direction, that Shanghai avant-garde artists distanced themselves from it. I will illustrate this point in the case study chapters which follow. It would be a mistake to say that the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai in the 1980s was led by the central art discourse, rather I argue that the experimental art production in the avant-garde art scene of the early 1980s in Shanghai was the precursor for the arrival of contemporary Chinese art in China. In his introductory essay in the catalogue of the survey exhibition *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985*, art critic and curator Wang Nanming quoted a phrase from artist Li Shan, one of the protagonists in the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai: "The so-called 'New Wave' was already old on its arrival in 1985." ("当 85 到来的时候, 所谓的新潮已经旧了.")¹⁶⁵

The Matrix of Art Institutions and Organisations

The following section of this chapter looks at the matrix of art institutions and organisations in Shanghai that helped support such developments as discussed above. Here I will provide a general introduction to the milieu and to key art institutions in the contemporary art scene in Shanghai in the 1980s.

¹⁶⁵ Wang Nanming, "上海早期抽象: 来源于艺术形态史? 来源于设计? 抑或来源于文化学?" ["Shanghai Early Abstract: From the Formalist History? From Design? Or from the Cultural Studies?"], *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985* (Shanghai: Zendai MoMA, 2008). p.12. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. Wang is a Shanghai art critic. He has been actively participating in the contemporary art discourse in China since 1990 with a substantial list of publications. In his exhibition catalogue essay Wang quoted Li Shan's phrase from his interview with the artist in 2007. Li often expressed this view to me also in our conversations.

Art institutions and art organisations in Shanghai undoubtedly played an important role in the emergence of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s. In many cases, the motivation or inspiration for change derived from key individuals within those institutions rather than the bureaucratic structure and the political system, an argument I will focus on in the next chapter in a case study on the Shanghai Art Museum. A detailed examination of all art institutions and organisations in Shanghai in the 1980s is outside the scope of this thesis. However, some of those institutions and organisations in Shanghai have been an inseparable component of the artistic pathways for many local artists especially for the avant-garde artists discussed in this thesis.

Despite the public discourse on contemporary art in Shanghai of the 1980s being affected by the lack of a formal art academy and the fact that there were no tertiary education programmes for training art critics during that period, this did not overshadow high level intellectual education programmes in universities and other art education institutions in Shanghai. The artists selected for study in this thesis all shared an excellent art education that equipped them not only with strong techniques in art practice but also the analytical skills to engage with high level intellectual discourses in their own way namely through the “studio discourse.”¹⁶⁶ In the Introduction, I have discussed some aspects of modern art education in China, which consisted of two parallel streams, traditional Chinese art and Western art. Within the Western art stream, there has been a constant struggle between the realists and the modernists to guide the direction of art education. The CCP had endorsed realist art to serve its political aims from the 1920s. After coming to power in 1949, the CCP adopted the socialist realism art model from the Soviet Union into its art policy. Art training associated with the art style of socialist realism and its ideology dominated art education in China. Modernist art practices and their ideas were suppressed and purged after 1949 and did not take hold until after the introduction of the “reform and opening-up” policies in 1979, which brought a measure of relaxation to the dominance of political ideology in cultural production in China.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ See the definition of the term “studio discourse” in the Introduction and the related discussions earlier in this chapter. The high level of intellectual capacity has been seen as a commonality that represented a broad feature of avant-garde artists in China in the 1980s. In recent discourse, critics in China have expressed the view that the ’85 art movement in the 1980s was an intellectual elite art movement.

¹⁶⁷ The education system in China after 1949 went through a vigorous period of development during the 1950s and early 1960s. The government adopted the art education system from the Soviet Union and introduced the art of the Soviet Union to the Chinese public in translated articles and publications as well as through art exhibitions. There were also active professional personnel visits and exchanges through the Cultural Ministry and the Education Ministry during that period. Between 1953 and 1963, the government sent about 30 students to the Ilya Repin Leningrad Institute for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (previously the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, or Imperial Academy of Arts) where they studied for Bachelor and Master degrees

The normal operations of educational institutions were interrupted during the Cultural Revolution in China. In Shanghai, the interruptions varied in length for each institution with a few able to operate under limited and approved teaching programs, such as the Shanghai Music Conservatorium.¹⁶⁸ In the late 1970s and 1980s in Shanghai, the institutions for formal tertiary fine art education and training were the Department of Set Design at STA, the Department of Fine Art at Shanghai Normal University (SNU), the East China Normal University's Department of Fine Art, and the Shanghai Fine Art College (SFAC) (amalgamated into Shanghai University School of Art in 1983). My research finds a significant number of active experimental/avant-garde artists in Shanghai have been connected to two educational institutions, the STA and the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College (SACC) (a vocational education institution). This phenomenon was contributed largely by those teachers who were modernists and students who were influenced by the modernist art ideas from these two institutions. Their art ideas and experimental art practices were not approved by those institutions' official policy or programs.¹⁶⁹

In terms of key art institutions in Shanghai, the Shanghai Museum as distinct from the Shanghai Art Museum was the major public museum in Shanghai and with its rich collection of Chinese art and artefacts from antiquity has been the international face of Chinese culture for the city and indeed in the country more generally since its inception in 1952. It also played a crucial role in organising and hosting international modern art exhibitions

in oil painting, sculpture, printmaking, stage art/set design, and art theory courses. Most of these students were young and talented art teachers from art academies in China. On their return, they were sent to major art academies and universities such as the CAFA and CAA, Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Nanjing Art Institute (currently Nanjing University of Arts), Nanjing Normal University Department of Fine Art, and STA Stage Art/Set Design Department, as key figures for implementing this adopted art education system. (See Xi Jingzhi, "苏联的美术教育及其对中国的影响," ["The influence of Soviet Union's art education in China"] in *Fine Arts in China* (14 November 2008): p.4.) The significant influence of the Soviet educational system on China's art education was facilitated by visiting art educators such as the painter Konstantin Mefodyevich Maximov and the sculptor Nicholas Nicholayevich Kelindhoff, both from the V. Surikov Moscow State Academy Art Institute. Their visits, together with the influence of returning Chinese students, consolidated the Soviet model of China's art education. (See Shui Tianzhong, "俄苏美术对中国当代美术的影响," ["The Influence of Russian and Soviet Art on China's Contemporary Art"] in 《美术馆》 [*Art Museum*] 1 (2008): 67-82.) In the Introduction to this thesis, I discussed the influence of Soviet art on Chinese art in general. I also emphasised that modernist ideas had penetrated and taken a strong hold in Shanghai in the early twentieth century. The art educational experiences of the artists discussed in the case studies reflected the strong influence of the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters of this thesis.

¹⁶⁸ During an Australian cultural delegation visit to the Shanghai Music Conservatorium in 1984, the director told a member of the delegation Dr Caroline Turner that the Conservatorium had a limited teaching program and very little approved music during the Cultural Revolution. (A personal note to Lansheng Zhang 2017.)

¹⁶⁹ The influences from these two art educational institutions in the late 1970s and 1980s will be further discussed in the artist case study chapters in this thesis.

during the 1970s and the early part of the 1980s as will be demonstrated in the following discussion under the heading of “International Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1970s and 1980s.” This is because the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery was, until 1984, responsible mainly for showing local and national exhibitions that were organised by the Chinese Artists Association Shanghai Branch, the city and central government, as well as other local art institutions. The transformation of the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery into the Shanghai Art Museum gave a new mandate for the new art museum’s exhibition programmes and collections to focus on modern and contemporary art. An in-depth discussion on China’s art organisations, bureaucracy and structures and the transformation of the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery into the Shanghai Art Museum will be undertaken in the next chapter.

There were a number of district cultural centres and Worker’s Clubs in Shanghai that made important contributions to the local art community in the 1970s and 1980s. Individuals in influential administrative positions within an organisation were the key to those institutions engaging with modern and contemporary art activities.¹⁷⁰ Most avant-garde artists in Shanghai in one way or another have had associations with those organisations either before they became a professional artist or after as an art professional invited to participate in the activities in teaching studio art practice sponsored by those organisations. I also attended those training classes in the local district Cultural Centre (区文化馆)¹⁷¹ and the Worker’s Club in the Hongkou District of Shanghai when I developed my interest in art in the late 1970s before I entered an art and design college. This personal experience was a common path to an artistic career for Shanghai artists in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Although the district Cultural Centres and the Worker’s Clubs in Shanghai were government-controlled, community-based organisations, the collective cultural activities did not result in forming many art groups because the ethos of individualism was so strong in Shanghai during this period.¹⁷² This can be demonstrated through the unofficial art exhibitions in Shanghai discussed below.

¹⁷⁰ Quite often, those administrators were artists themselves. During my research for the case studies in relation to the artists and the art events, I interviewed two artists/administrators Yu Renjie 余仁杰 and Huang Azhong 黄阿忠, who ran the visual art section in the Hongkou 虹口 and Putuo 普陀 Cultural Centres. These were the key active Cultural Centres in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

¹⁷¹ A district level cultural organisation provided a space and conducted arts activities and training classes for the district residents. In the visual art section of the Cultural Centres, there were art technique training classes for different age groups run by invited professional artists from art educational institutions in Shanghai. Because those training classes were not within the formal art education system, both trainers and students were able to enjoy greater freedom for art expression. From time to time, some art exhibitions were organised by the Cultural Centres by the display of artworks in the local street window display cabinets.

¹⁷² All cultural organisations in China were government-controlled until the 1990s.

The Critical Early Unofficial Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s

In the Introduction, I have defined what constituted unofficial art and exhibitions.¹⁷³ Artist-organised exhibitions were characteristic of the Shanghai art scene in the late 1970s and the 1980s and those exhibitions qualified as unofficial art exhibitions. In this chapter, I have described the main characteristic of the contemporary art discourse in Shanghai as the “studio discourse” that existed alongside the public art discourse. This discourse had two aspects. One was the communication exchanged between likeminded artists and friends in private studios. Another was the artists organising exhibitions not only for showing their art, but also as a way to participate in the local and national art discourse by using their artworks and exhibitions to express their individual views. The following selected unofficial art exhibitions exemplify this discourse.

Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition

The year 1979 saw the start of the significant political, economic, and cultural transition period of the post-Cultural Revolution era in China. This resulted from the new direction of the “reform and opening-up” policy that was laid down at a pivotal meeting of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP in December 1978. It was marked by important initiatives and new beginnings in China’s modern history. Among those beginnings, the most important ones with long lasting impact were in the first year of implementation of the “reform and opening-up” policy, and the formalisation of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China that took effect on 1 January 1979.¹⁷⁴ In China’s art world, some artists began to organise art exhibitions themselves to show their works. In this regard, the *Stars* art exhibitions with its initial event on 27 September 1979 has been considered by many art critics as an early example of an unofficial art exhibition. However, these critics have not included in their critiques the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition*, an unofficial art exhibition in Shanghai organised by artists themselves, that had occurred nine months earlier.

¹⁷³ See Introduction footnote 70 and an in-depth discussion on “unofficial” art and exhibitions in Chapter 1 under the subheading “The Critical Early Unofficial Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s,” and in Chapter 2 under the subheading “Political and Bureaucratic Structures in the 1980s.”

¹⁷⁴ The US was not the first country to establish a diplomatic relationship with PRC. Some Western countries established a diplomatic relationship not long after the PRC was established in 1949, including Switzerland (1950), France (1964), Canada (1970), United Kingdom (1972), Australia (1972). The formalisation of diplomatic relations between the US and China marked an historical change for the two countries from a Cold War hostile relationship to a new era of dialogue. Cultural exchanges have helped develop and enhance the relationship. The exhibition *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* in October 1981 is an important example. Further discussion about this exhibition is found later in this chapter.

The *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* was staged at the Children Palace in the Huangpu district in Shanghai (上海黄浦区少年宫) on 27 January 1979. It was the first “unofficial exhibition” showing local art in the impressionist style in public since the CCP came into power in 1949. The significance of this exhibition was exemplified by both the type of art and the aesthetic language of the art displayed and in the way of organising the exhibition. Previously all art exhibitions in China, irrespective of size, had been organised systematically through the official bureaucracies after 1949. By contrast this exhibition was the first self-funded and organised without official bureaucratic involvement since the 1950s by twelve like-minded artists. The artists sought out an exhibition venue to avoid obstacles and carefully planned the timing for the exhibition.¹⁷⁵ They charged an entry ticket to cover the venue rental and other costs. The actual opening was held on the Chinese New Year’s Eve 27 January 1979 and the exhibition opened to the public on the first day of the New Year. It drew a large crowd of visitors and was extended a further week until 12 February to meet the public demand. The exhibition was referred to in Chinese as an “unofficial exhibition” (在野画展, or 非官方画展).¹⁷⁶ (Figures 11, 12, 13.)



Figure 11. The *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* opening at the Children Palace in Huangpu district, Shanghai (上海黄浦区少年宫) on 27 January 1979.



Figure 12. The display of the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition*.



Figure 13. The *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* opening at Wuhan Zhongshan Park in March 1979. Artists from right: Kong Boji, Qian Peishen, and Chen Juyuan.

¹⁷⁵ An article in Chinese by a participant artist Chen Juyuan vividly recounts in detail the making of this exhibition. See Chen Juyuan, *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition Past Anecdotes*, 2013, online article, <http://www.cnarts.net/cweb/news/zt_news_read.asp?topic=%C9%CF%BA%A3%B2%C9%B7%E7&id=272889>, viewed 02 February 2015.

¹⁷⁶ In light of the success of the exhibition, the Hubei Artists Association 湖北美术家协会 immediately requested it to travel to Wuhan 武汉 where it met the same warm reception from the public during a two-week exhibition in March the same year.

On 27 September 1979, a group of 23 artists in Beijing similarly formed together and mounted the first *Stars* exhibition in the park next to the National Art Museum of China. It was closed down after two days by the authorities and the artists responded with a public demonstration on 1 October 1979 (National Day).¹⁷⁷ The authorities later gave approval for the *Stars* exhibition to take place inside the National Art Museum of China from 24 August to 7 September 1980. The first *Stars* exhibition set off a chain of events that have been widely discussed by art critics both in China and abroad.¹⁷⁸ The first *Stars* exhibition and the subsequent public demonstration have led it to be considered a radical and transformative event in contemporary Chinese art.¹⁷⁹ A general consensus is that its significance was in its socio-political messaging influenced by the concurrent political movement known as the “Democracy Wall Movement” (1978-1979) in Beijing, rather than changes in artistic



Figure 14. Shen Tianwan, *A Lovely Black Cat*, 1977.
Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm.



Figure 15. Kong Boji, *Dunhuang Grotto series*, 1979.
Oil stick on paper, 82 x 80 cm.

¹⁷⁷ The authorities closed down the exhibition two days later as it was “影响了群众的正常生活和社会秩序” [“disturbing people’s normal life and social order”]. At the time in Beijing there was an active political movement known as the “Democracy Wall Movement” (1978-1979). The key participating artists include Huang Rui 黄锐, Ma Desheng 马德升, Wang Keping 王克平, Qu Lele 曲磊磊, Bo Yun 薄云, Yan Li 严力, Yang Yiping 杨益平, Mao Lizi 毛栗子, Jiang Yun 蒋云, Zhong Acheng 钟阿城, Shao Fei 邵飞, Li Shuang 李爽, Ai Weiwei 艾未未. There is considerable literature on the *Stars* group and its exhibitions in China, and internationally. See information on the *Stars* group at TheStarsArt online website <<http://www.thestarsart.com/3181.html>>, viewed 06 April 2015.

¹⁷⁸ The majority of participating artists in the first exhibition did not receive any academic training; their works varied in style, ranging from realist to modernist-influenced paintings and prints. Critics noted that some works had political implications, for example, the wooden sculptures by Wang Keping. Wang’s two woodcarving heads “Idol” and “Silent” were the most conspicuous works from the first *Stars* exhibition. The “Idol” piece was an elongated portrait of Mao as a satire on the personality cult. The “Silent” piece was a head and the face had one eye blinded and a block of wood was stuck into the mouth that implied that people’s thoughts and expression were suppressed during the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁷⁹ See Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.46-52.



Figure 16. Qian Peishen, *Non-Sleep City*, 1978. Gouache on paper, 75x53 cm.

language.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, the works in the first *Stars* exhibition covered a wide-range of styles from realism to modernism. This exhibition differed from the earlier *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* which had focused only on works in the modernist style for their art expressions. (Figure14, 15, 16.)

From the aspect of aesthetic language, the exhibits in the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* showed the influence of early modernist art and the artists' exploration of that language that had now emerged from underground into the public eye. Initially, the idea was to organise an exhibition with a small number of artists, but it gradually expanded to include twelve participants.¹⁸¹ I saw the exhibition and knew half of the participating artists personally as they were friends of my older brother's. One of the participating artists was

¹⁸⁰ The "Democracy Wall Movement" began in November 1978 and lasted until December 1979, during which time many thousands of people put up "big character posters" (大字报) expressing their views on a wall along Chang'An Street. Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" policy provided scope for intellectuals to write political criticism and poems, which in the early period of the movement, had the support of Deng. As his policies became the target of criticism the movement ceased.

¹⁸¹ My interviews with two participating artists Huang Azhong and Xu Siji as well as the artists and art administrators Yu Renjie 余仁杰 (who was running art programmes at the Hongkou District Cultural Centre at the time), Yu Zhusheng 于祝生 (current name Yu Fan 于帆) (who was a coordinator of Hongkou District Art Teachers Teaching Research Group and active in the local art scene) reveal that the very early initiatives from those four artists failed in their early attempt to secure an exhibition venue in 1978. This led them to reach out to like-minded artists such as Qian Peisen and Shen Tianwan for help. They eventually found and secured the exhibition venue at the Children's Palace of Huangpu District later in the year; meanwhile a group member Yu Zhusheng had just moved to Hong Kong. The final exhibitors had then decided on twelve artists. (Yu Renjie, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 27 June 2017); Xu Siji, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 04 July 2017); Huang Azhong, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 03 July 2017).

working in the exhibition venue of the Children's Palace and persuaded the management of his organisation to agree to approve the exhibition.¹⁸² The exhibition presented twelve local artists' works, mostly in the modernist style, ranging through impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism and fauvism.¹⁸³ Some of them, like Shen Tianwan 沈天万 and Han Boyou 韩柏友, had close links with the early generation of Shanghai modernists, such as Liu Haisu and Yan Wenliang 颜文樑. This exhibition was thus a public display of the continuing legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai. The exhibition's subtitle was *Exploration, Innovation, and Contention*. The exhibition manifesto written in a poetic form described the current more relaxed political climate as follows: "Thick layers of ice are now melting; And the spring of art is approaching; The threat of death has been conquered; Eventually, all flowers bloom together." In this manifesto, it was advocated that "every artist is entitled to choose the form of expression for his artistic creation; and to delineate what he feels deeply attached to; Let soul be fused in; and make the tree of art evergreen."¹⁸⁴

Thirty years later, Shanghai artist and writer Chen Danqing expressed his views on this exhibition:

Emancipating themselves, these artists staged the first (post 1949) unofficial art exhibition in the country. Looking back at it now it was actually quite routine. The "Blue Danube Waltz", once fashionable in Shanghai but banned for over a decade, played in the exhibition hall throughout. Looking at the long-lost landscape and still life paintings in the exhibition hall and listening to the "Blue Danube," we felt we had at last passed the night of the Cultural Revolution to be greeted at dawn by the West.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Chen Juyuan, "'十二人画展' 往事过程" ["Memories of the Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition"] in *Shanghai Caifeng* online article <http://www.cnarts.net/cweb/news/zt_news_read.asp?topic=%C9%CF%BA%A3%B2%C9%B7%E7&id=272889>, viewed on 02 February 2015.

¹⁸³ The twelve Shanghai artists were Chen Junde 陈钧德, Chen Juyuan 陈巨源, Chen Juhong 陈巨洪, Guo Runlin 郭润林, Han Boyou 韩柏友, Huang Azhong 黄阿忠, Kong Boji 孔柏基, Luo Buzhen 罗步臻, Qian Peisen 钱培森, Shen Tianwan 沈天万, Wang Jianer 王健尔, Xu Siji 徐思基.

¹⁸⁴ Chen Juyuan, "Memories of the Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition." There are articles, artists' memoirs and interviews of artists on the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* that have been published in public media in China over the years. It is also documented in the publication by Biljana Ciric that was published in 2014. See Biljana Ciric, *History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979 – 2006* (Manchester: UK Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014), p.8.

¹⁸⁵ Chen Danqing, "我的回忆—70 年代的美术和 美术展览," [My Memoir: 70s Art and Art Exhibitions] in 《回忆与陈述：关于 1949 年之后的中国艺术和艺术史》 [*Memories and Statements: About the Chinese Art and Art History after 1949*] ed., Lu Peng (Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Publishing House, 2009). English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

In the late 1970s, the cultural sphere in China was still under the shadow of the Cultural Revolution and its political restrictions, with the effect that modernist art was still not accepted. Those Shanghai artists bravely came out in public to show their works in the modernist style so as to break from the mainstream official art in the model of the Cultural Revolution that derived from socialist realist art. The official art style was epitomised by political propaganda and was “red, bright, and luminous” (“红, 光, 亮”) in appearance, a rubric for all cultural production (especially in film and visual art) during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁸⁶ Commentators have often characterised the first *Stars* exhibition as an avant-garde act and the earlier *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* as a modernist art revival. In the context of the political situation at that time, the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* should be, I argue, considered as avant-garde regardless of the modernist style of art in the exhibition. This exhibition broke the mode of the official exhibition system and rejected the official aesthetic paradigm. It acted as a forerunner of the unofficial exhibitions in the early development of contemporary Chinese art in the late 1970s.¹⁸⁷ It also foreshadowed the emergence of a distinct local art voice from Shanghai in the avant-garde art scene in China in the 1980s, which was also, I argue, characterised by the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism and the spirit of individualism. However, this significant exhibition was neglected in the important publication *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*.¹⁸⁸

Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983

In September 1983, ten Shanghai artists got together to show their recent experimental works in a hall at Fudan University’s staff club in Shanghai. They were mostly art lecturers and graduates from the STA including Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Wang Bangxiong 王邦雄, Fang Fang 方昉, Leng Hong 冷宏, Cha Guojun 查国钧, Yu Xiaofu 俞晓夫, Gao Jing 高进, Dai Hengyang 戴恒扬, Zhou Jiahua 周家华. The exhibition was titled *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983* and consisted of 47 pieces of abstract artworks exploring and experimenting with various techniques and materials to express the artists’ thoughts and feelings. (Figure 17,18, 19.) The chosen location of the exhibition was intended to

¹⁸⁶ Under the Party’s direction of “Three highlights” (“三突出”), “Sublime” (“高, 大, 上”), and “red, bright, and luminescent” (“红, 光, 亮”), the art produced during the Cultural Revolution reflected the stereotypes. See Gao Minglu, et al. *The ‘85 Movement*, 24; Wang Mingxian, 《红光亮：文革艺术的新美学》 [*Red, Bright, and Luminescent: New Aesthetic from the Cultural Revolution Art*], at <http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/artist/txt_ab/a4eaAApl/f2ahxuo>, viewed 02 November 2015.

¹⁸⁷ My view is shared by other artists and critics, for example, a critical figure in breaking the mould of official art in late 1970s, was artist and art commentator Chen Danqing through his articles and public talks.

¹⁸⁸ See Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*.



Figure 17, 18. The Invitation of the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983*.



Figure 19. The opening of the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983*.

initiated dialogue with the students and teachers from the science and philosophy disciplines in the university.¹⁸⁹ The exhibition foreword stated that:

¹⁸⁹ See Huang Shi 黄石, “活跃上海美术创作需要消除阴影” [“Eliminate Shadows to Invigorate Shanghai Art Creation”] in 《拾-20 实验作品文献集》 [10-20 *Experimental Work Collection*], ed., Deng Ming (Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press, 2004), p.12. The article was originally published in the *Shanghai Culture and Art Weekly* No.75 September 5 (1986): 1.

Science requires experiment, as does art. As language is often inadequate to express the visual art of painting, it is best to see the work itself. This is an exhibition of our experimental work; they are what we want to say.¹⁹⁰

The exhibition opened just before the nationwide Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was launched. The authorities closed the exhibition a day and a half later, and a major local newspaper *Liberation Daily* published an article referring to the mixed-media works of Zhang Jianjun, the art of Li Shan and the abstract paintings of Wang Bangxiong, criticising the artists as “following in the footsteps of the West” and “weird” in their techniques and use of materials.¹⁹¹ (Figure 20, 21, 22.) The article concluded that it was “difficult to understand” such artistic language and warned that “abstraction has no future in China.”¹⁹² The artists came under severe political pressure but not for long, as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was itself short-lived.

The exhibition was not widely known by the public during or after the event, but was important for the art community in Shanghai. Not until three years later, in 1986, were those



Figure 20. Zhang Jianjun, *Contraction & Expansion* 《聚·散》, 1983. Mixed media. This work showed in the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983*.



Figure 21. Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan in front of Li's work in the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983*. The background art work is Li Shan's *Primeval* 《初始》 series, 1982. Oil on canvas.

¹⁹⁰ Deng Ming, ed., 《拾-20 实验作品文献集》 [10-20 *Experimental Work Collection*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press, 2004). The foreword is printed on the back of the cover of this publication. Original Chinese text: “科学需要实验，艺术同样如此。作为视觉艺术的绘画，用语言常常说不清楚，最好的办法就是看作品的本身。这里展出的就是我们的实验作品，这些作品也就是我们想说的话。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

¹⁹¹ Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan's artworks are discussed later in this thesis on p.156, P.158, p.184, and pp.195-196.

¹⁹² The article was written by Huang Ke 黄可, an official critic from Shanghai Artists Association. It was published in the *Liberation Daily*. See Huang Ke, “Abstract Art, New Forms and National Conditions,” 10-20 *Experimental Work Collection* ed., Deng Ming (Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press, 2004), pp.9-10. The article was originally published in *Liberation Daily*, December 6 (1983): p.4.



Figure 22. Gao Jin, *Moment* 《瞬间》, 1983. Oil on paper.

artists' artistic experimentations and the interdisciplinary approach in exploring how to broaden the artistic language recognised publically as avant-garde, a "forerunner in the national art world of its day" (走在当时全国美术界的前面) that was published in the *Journal of Shanghai Culture and Arts* by local critic Huang Shi 黄石.¹⁹³ He pointed out that the exhibition was a "major expression of conceptual renewal in art" (艺术观念更新的重要活动) at a critical time "two years earlier than the '85 Art New Wave movement." It made a strong impact on the local art community.¹⁹⁴

Concave-Convex Exhibition

From discussions amongst a close circle of artists the concept to make a "new sculpture" exhibition to "break away from two-dimensional art" evolved with Yu Youhan coining the title *Concave-Convex* for the exhibition.¹⁹⁵ The exhibition opened in November 1986 at the Cultural Centre of Xuhui District in Shanghai. Sixteen artists participated with their experimental works, using found-materials for installations, making site-specific art, as well as projections.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Huang Shi, "Eliminate Shadows to Invigorate Shanghai Art Creation," p.12.

¹⁹⁴ See Lu Quan 陆权, "再过二十年, 我们来相会: 1983-2004 阶段绘画实验展" [After Next 20 Years, We Will Meet: Write for 1983-2004 Period of Experimental Painting Exhibition], in 《拾-20 实验作品文献集》 [10-20 Experimental Work Collection], ed., Deng Ming, (Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press, 2004), pp.2-3.

¹⁹⁵ Yu Youhan, "Interview with AAA and Biljana Ciric," in *History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979 – 2006*, ed., Biljana Ciric, p.477; Li Shan, "Interview with Biljana Ciric," in *History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979 – 2006*, ed., Biljana Ciric, pp.180-181.

¹⁹⁶ The sixteen artists were: Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Yu Sen 予森, Wu Chenrong 吴晨荣, Li Chen 李晨, Sun Jinghua 孙晋华, Hu Jiakang 胡家康, Jiang Quan 蒋权, Qing Yifeng 秦一峰, Ding Yi 丁乙, Zhang Guoliang 张国梁, Sun Jingbo 孙景波, Jin Ang 金昂, Wang Ziwei 王子卫. The exhibits included the installation work named *The Singing Ms. Teresa Teng* (会唱歌的邓丽君小姐) by Yu Youhan; a large mixed medium mural titled *The Dream*

In contrast to many avant-garde art exhibitions and events presented by formal artists' groups in the mid-1980s, this exhibition initiated by Li Shan and Yu Sen 予森 was achieved by an open invitation to local artists. A group of young artists and many university students interacted with the artists during their performance at the opening. Li Jian, an art reporter at the *Shanghai Xinmin Evening Newspaper* 上海新民晚报, commented that the exhibition's "inadvertent" and "wild" manner was reminiscent of the East Village Art in New York.¹⁹⁷ (Figure 23, 24,



Figure 23. The performance at the opening of the *Concave-Convex Exhibition* by Yang Hui, Song Haidong and others.



Figure 24. A street performance associated with the *Concave-Convex Exhibition* by Ding Yi, Qin Yifeng, and Zhang Guoliang.



Figure 25. The poster of *Concave-Convex Exhibition*.

Awake (醒的梦) by Li Shan; and a projection of slides on the public performance by Ding Yi, Qing Yifeng, and Zhang Guoliang. See an in-depth discussion on Yu's installation work and Li's mural in relation to their other works in Chapters 4 and 5. The slide projections recorded the performances by three artists that took place in public such as on streets and restaurants prior to this exhibition. The artists wrapped themselves in yellow cloth in different gestures or shapes. The interactions between the artists and audiences were achieved through the wrapping process. The artists intended to bring the art out of the museum and to communicate with audiences in public spaces. (See Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.363-364; Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2006).

¹⁹⁷ Li Jian, "An Art Exhibition Appeared in This City That Was Hard to Understand," in *Shanghai Xinmin Evening Newspaper*, 25 November 1986.

25.) The new forms of art and activities in the exhibition drew public attention. This exhibition has been often viewed mistakenly as an exhibition of the collective art groups. Some critics remarked that this type of exhibition and its impact reflected the “advantage and power” (优势和力量) of “collectivity” (群体性) which had been lacking in Shanghai.¹⁹⁸ However, the open invitation form of the exhibition, I argue, demonstrated the spirit of individualism among Shanghai artists participating in the avant-garde art movement at that period.

The 1980s Art Exhibition and the M Conceptual Art Performance

In this thesis, I have argued that the spirit of individualism was the core expression in artistic practices and actions of the avant-garde artists. This did not, however, rule out some artists forming art groups that took divergent approaches in opposing official art. There were two art groups in Shanghai, one was called the Grass Society (草草社) which was formed in 1979 and it held an inaugural show entitled the *1980s Art Exhibition* (八十年代画展) in 1980. The artworks in the exhibition displayed a strong influence of modernist art from the West, as well as an exploration of combining watercolour painting and traditional Chinese painting techniques.¹⁹⁹ The other group, formed in the 1986, called itself the M Art Group

¹⁹⁸ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.215.

¹⁹⁹ After a period of discussion, a core group of local artists reached consensus to establish a formal group (Grass Society) approved by the officials of the Cultural Centre of Luwan 卢湾 district in Shanghai and at the same time, an exhibition was planned. The key activist of the group Qiu Deshu 仇德树 was a staff member of the Centre. The Grass Society group included seven local and four Hangzhou artists: Qiu Deshu 仇德树, Jiang Depu 姜德溥, Guo Runlin 郭润, Chen Jialing 陈家泠, and Chen Juyuan 陈巨源, (Yuan Songmin 袁颂民, Dai Dunbang 戴敦邦, Zeng Mi 曾密, Xu Yinhuai 徐英槐, Pan Feilun 潘飞仑, and Zhu Yinlin 朱垠麟). Li Shan was part of early discussions on the exhibition but later dropped out from participation. The exhibition was called *The 1980s Art Exhibition* (“八十年代画展”) and it opened at the Cultural Centre on 16 February 1980. The Grass Society had no further activities after the exhibition and soon dissolved. Commentators have suggested that “although the Grass Society exhibition was short-lived, the group remains a testament to Shanghai’s engagement with European modernism and early experiments in contemporary ink painting in China.” (See “A Milestone for Contemporary Art in China--The Grass Society,” <<https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/a-milestone-for-contemporary-art-in-china-the-grass-society>>, viewed 25 May 2019.) In the decade after 2010, two important exhibitions curated by Kuiyi Shen and Julia F. Andrews, the *Blooming in the Shadows* (2011) at the China Institute in New York and the *Light Before Dawn* (2013) at Asia Society in Hong Kong, both focused on three art groups of the No Names, Stars, and the Grass Society. Importantly, these two exhibitions brought the lesser known art groups (No Name and Grass Society) to the attention of international audiences. There are a substantial number of studies and articles on the Grass Society that have been published over the last ten years. See Joan Lebold Cohen, *New China Art 1949-1986* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishing House, 1987), p.67; Yu Jiajie, “Interview with Qiu Deshu,” *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985*; Kuiyi Shen and Julia Frances Andrews, *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985* (New York: New York China Institute Gallery, China Institute, 2011); Zeng Yulan 曾玉兰, “草草社个案研究” [A Case Study on Grass Society], at news.artron.net <https://news.artron.net/20070604/n29051_3.html>, viewed 09 May 2016.

and in the same year staged its inaugural exhibition titled *M Conceptual Art Performance*. The “M Conceptual Performance Exhibition” [“M 观念艺术表演展”] was staged in the exhibition hall at Shanghai Hongkou District No.2 Workers Club in late December 1986. In this show, the sixteen artists each performed a separate work to demonstrate such emotions as frustration and anger and subversive and anti-art actions. The controversial performance drew the authority’s attention. Their future performance plan stopped and the artists in the group went separately to pursue their individual artistic directions.²⁰⁰ These two groups shared some common features: both expressed their ideas and objectives as a collective art group, and both were a short-lived presence manifested in a single exhibition or performance.

In their exhibition manifesto, members of the Grass Society declared themselves to be a “painting research group” founded on their “independent spirit, individual style, and unique technique.”²⁰¹ Two artists from the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition*, Chen Juyuan and Guo Runlin, joined the group; it was Chen who helped draft both exhibitions’ manifestos. There were similarities between these two exhibitions in terms of ideas and art styles. The emphasis on the idea of individuality in the manifesto was felt by critics to “bear a clear

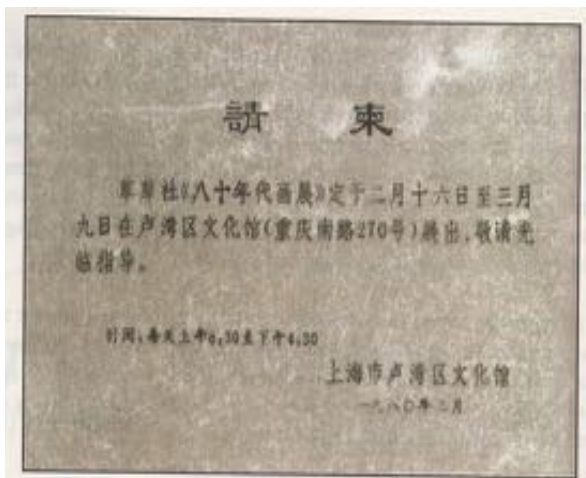


Figure 26. Grass Society's first exhibition invitation.



Figure 27. Grass Society's first exhibition invitation.

²⁰⁰ The members of the M Art group were: Yang Hui 杨晖, Song Haidong 宋海东, Wang Guqing 汪谷青, Zhao Chuan 赵川, Yang Xu 杨旭, Zhou Tiehai 周铁海, Qin Yifeng 秦一峰, Gong Jianqing 龚建庆, Shen Fan 申凡, Yang Dongbai 杨冬白, Tang Guangming 汤光明, Hu Yuelong 胡曰龙, Weng Liping 翁立平, Jia Yuxiang 贾宇翔, Fu Yuehui 付跃慧, and Li Zuming 李祖明. As background, the M Art group was formed following a spontaneous action art performance by two artists, Yang Hui and Song Haidong, which interrupted the opening of the Concave-Convex in November 1986. They used plastic string to tie up both guests and visitors, and they added objects to the works on display, which caused momentary chaos. This event was a prelude to the formation of the M Art Group. (See Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.364-367; Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*.)

²⁰¹ Zeng Yulan, *A Case Study on Grass Society*. The original Chinese text: “独立精神、独创风格、独特技巧” and “绘画艺术研究团体。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.



Figure 28. Qiu Deshu, *In an Uneasy World* 《在不安的世界里之二》, 1979.
Ink, crayon on paper, 116 x 96.5 cm.

hallmark of modernist art.”²⁰² Some works in the exhibition displayed nascent abstract tendencies. (Figure 26, 27, 28.)

The art presented by the Grass Society and the M Art Group from 1980 to 1986 illustrated the swift changing trajectory of Shanghai’s avant-garde. The “M” of the latter group referred to “Man,” “Montage,” and “Mephisto.”²⁰³ Seeing “life as art” and turning “art into action,” the artists performed a series of separate episodes in this exhibition. A performance by Yang Xu and Zhou Tiehai, titled *Sense of Violence* (暴力感) was the most controversial and performed by one naked artist with his arms held back by two assistants. The other artist was using needles to prick the back of the naked artist and as he struggled, he screamed out: “Nietzsche is dead! I am the Chinese Nietzsche!” In the background, there was a couple cuddling and kissing. At the end, all actors fell on the floor. The entire performance lasted about ten minutes. Critics described the *M Conceptual Performance Exhibition* as the “most radical performance since the ’85 Art Movement.”²⁰⁴ Although

²⁰² *ibid.* The original Chinese text: “已经带有更清晰的现代主义艺术特征.” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

²⁰³ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.364.

²⁰⁴ See Yang Hui, Zhao Chuan, “杨晖和赵川谈 1980 年的 M 艺术群体” [“A discussion on the M Art Group in 1986 by Yang Hui and Zhao Chuan”], in *History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979 – 2006*, ed., Biljana Ciric, pp.434-438; Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.364-365. Another group taking anti-art actions against pre-existing conditions in China’s art world such as the *Xiamen Dada* group in Fuzhou city reflected a new impetus in the nationwide avant-garde art movement in the mid 1980s. “Xiamen Dada” group exemplifies those young artists who organised themselves as a group undertaking radical actions. The group formed in 1986 with a total of thirteen members who were graduates of art academies and

collectivism was not the objective for these two art groups, both groups had a level of influence on the national collectivist art movement and were a dynamic part of the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai. Their exhibition and art performance represented vanguard acts in the context of the contemporary art at the time. (Figures 29, 30, 31, 32.)



Figure 29. Yang Xu and Zhou Tiehai, *The Sense of Violence* 《暴力感》 performance, December 1986.



Figure 30. Tang Guangming, *Ritual* 《仪式》, performance, December 1986.

universities including Huang Yongping, Lin Jiahua 林嘉华, Jiao Yaoming 焦耀明, Yu Xiaogang 俞晓刚, Lin Chun 林春, Ji Tairan 记泰然, Cai Lixiong 蔡立雄, Chen Chengzong 陈承宗, Li Yuenian 李跃年, Li Xiang 李翔, Wu Yanping 吴燕平, Huang Ping 黄平, and Liu Yiling 刘一菱. The first exhibition *Xiamen Dada – Modern Art Exhibition* 厦门达达 – 现代艺术展 opened on 28 September 1986 at the Xiamen City New Art Gallery with about 100 artworks on display. The leading figure Huang Yongping wrote an article titled “Xiamen Dada – A Kind of Post-Modern?” (厦门达达 – 一种后现代) that has been seen as the manifesto for the group and the exhibition. At the end of the exhibition the artists burned over 60 exhibits. During the mid 1980s period, the group had conducted numerous activities including exhibitions and writing on art. There is a large volume of literature on this group published both in China and internationally, for example, see Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.326-344; Biljana Ciric, *History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979 – 2006*, pp.230-233; Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, pp.51, 95-96, 103-105; Paul Gladston, Ellen Thomas, Shu Qun, Bethan Ball, and ProQuest (Firm), “Avant-garde” Art Groups in China, 1979-1989 (Bristol, England; Chicago, Illinois: Intellect, 2013).



Figure 31. Song Haidong, *Deconstruction* 《摧毁》, performance, December 1986.



Figure 32. A group photo after the performances on the opening of the *M Conceptual Performance Exhibition* (December 1986).

Key International Exhibitions in Shanghai in the Late 1970s and Early 1980s

The international art exhibitions held in Shanghai during the 1970s and 1980s also had a significant influence on local art developments, some of which left a deep imprint on people's memories and had a profound effect on a generation of artists. These exhibitions were not part of the curatorial programmes of the Shanghai Art Museum; instead, they were organised largely through country-to-country governmental cultural exchange programs. Nevertheless, the impact of these exhibitions on the local art community has been quite significant in relation to the evolution of modern and contemporary art in Shanghai. These exhibitions have not been adequately studied and warrant scholarly attention in terms of the argument of this thesis.

During the ten years (1966-76) of the Cultural Revolution, China was largely isolated from international cultural exchange. After 1949 and during the Cultural Revolution a number of mainly socialist countries had established diplomatic relations with China and were allowed to hold art exhibitions in China. These exhibitions generally came via official channels through the foreign embassies in Beijing with the Ministry of Culture and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) and its branch offices in major cities.²⁰⁵ This controlled channel for international exhibitions in China continued after the Cultural Revolution until the mid-1980s. These centrally organised international exhibitions usually shared three major exhibition venues in Shanghai: the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery (later the Shanghai Art Museum),²⁰⁶ the Shanghai Museum,²⁰⁷ and the Shanghai Exhibition Centre.²⁰⁸ My research found that there were

²⁰⁵ Wang Binnan 王炳南, former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs was President of CPAFFC from 1975 to 1986 and was responsible for the oversight of all formal cultural programmes. For more information on Wang see the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/wjrw_665549/lrfbzjbzzl_665553/t40525.shtml>, viewed 17 February 2019. There were individuals in the central government and the art institutions in Beijing and other major cities who acted independently in supporting the development of modern and contemporary Chinese art during the late 1970s and 1980s. A lengthy discussion of these individuals, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁰⁶ See a detailed discussion on the transformation of the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery to the Shanghai Art Museum in Chapter 2.

²⁰⁷ The Shanghai Museum under Director Ma Chengyuan's 马承源 leadership played an important role as the only public museum of the city in the 1970s and the early 1980s that covered not only antiquity and classical art exhibitions, but also international modern art exhibitions. It also has a substantial collection of Shanghai School art. In Chapter 2 I will discuss the relationship between the Shanghai Museum and the Shanghai Art Museum in detail from historical, political and governmental cultural organisations structure perspectives, as well as their capacity in the engagement of international exhibitions.

²⁰⁸ The Shanghai Exhibition Centre 上海展览中心 building was built as the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building 中苏友好大厦 to commemorate the alliance between China and the Soviet Union in 1955. It is a major landmark

several international art exhibitions held at the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery in this period. During the Cultural Revolution in 1973, an exhibition titled *The History of Mexican Culture and Art Exhibition*, organised through the Mexican Embassy in Beijing, was held at the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery, showing Mexican ancient art and culture, modern mural art, and folk handicrafts.²⁰⁹ The Mexican modern mural art with its political messaging of the post-Mexican Revolution government from the early twentieth century fitted the CCP's rhetoric at the time. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1975, the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery hosted the *Canadian Landscape Painting Exhibition* and displayed 69 pieces, including the works of several artists in the "Group of Seven" from the National Gallery of Canada's collection.²¹⁰ In my interview with the artist Zhang Jianjun, he recalled the excitement brought about by that exhibition. It was, for him and many others, an eye-opening experience as they could view original oil paintings from overseas which were until then banned in China.²¹¹

Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century

In the spring of 1978, a significant art event in Shanghai profoundly affected many artists and, to a large extent, changed the art discourse in China. The *Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century* opened at the Shanghai Exhibition Centre on 25 April 1978. This exhibition will be referred to as "The French Exhibition" in the

and one of the largest integrated building complexes in the city centre of Shanghai. It has been hosting major political and governmental meetings, large industrial and trade expos and various large-scale exhibitions since its inception.

²⁰⁹ Wang Zhen (王震), *The Twentieth Century Shanghai Art Chronology* (二十世纪上海美术年表) (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2005), p.742. This exhibition of Mexican art in Shanghai was part of a Mexican cultural promotion tour of the Asia region at the time and was permitted in China because of the support for social realism art. In 2011, I participated in a seminar at the Australian National University and art historian Patrick D. Flores from the Philippines spoke on the influence of Mexican social realism art on the art of the Philippines in the 1970s. This indicates that the socio-political environment in some Asian countries at the time was receptive to Mexican social realist art.

²¹⁰ The paintings of the "Group of Seven" inspired by the Canadian landscape in impressionist and post-impressionist styles. From 1977 to 1978 immediately after the Cultural Revolution, there was an ephemeral enthusiasm for the social realism art style in Shanghai generated by the works of Romanian painter C. Corneliu Baba. Some of his works were displayed in the exhibition called *Romanian Art from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (罗马尼亚十九、二十世纪绘画展览) at the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery in 1977. The exhibition was organised by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) and shown in Beijing and Shanghai. However, the love affair between the local art community and the social realism style paintings of Romanian artist Baba was soon overtaken by an important art event in the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery in the following year.

²¹¹ When the exhibition opened at the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery, Zhang was in his early 20s working in the Shanghai Shipbuilding Factory while taking art training at the same time. The exhibition was very popular and the entry tickets were so sought after that his teacher had to write a letter to a friend for help to get a ticket for him. Zhang Jianjun, Interview with Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004).

following discussion. At the time, as I have noted, international exhibitions were organised by foreign embassies. The French Exhibition was no exception. It was organised by the French Embassy in Beijing through the CPAFFC and shown first in Beijing and then Shanghai. The French Exhibition consisted of eighty-six paintings from sixty-two artists and was assembled from forty-eight French museum collections, mostly the art of the Barbizon School of naturalism, realism and later impressionist and post-impressionist artists. The key French artists in those genres from this period were represented in this exhibition.²¹² The exhibition lasted thirty days and drew an overwhelming number of enthusiastic visitors from Shanghai and other areas in southern China.²¹³ The exhibition had started in Beijing with visitors attending from northern China and attracting similar enthusiasm.

The timing of the French Exhibition was critical. The Cultural Revolution had recently ended. The Party had set the direction for political and economic reforms and for implementing its “reform and opening-up” policy. Nevertheless, Communist ideology continued to dictate policies for art and its function. The adopted socialist realism and art education system of the Soviet Union together with the CCP’s cultural policy directives of revolutionary grand themes, glorifying heroic narratives in painterly bold brushstrokes still dominated art discourses and art practices in the country. After the long period of isolation when no individual artistic languages or personal feelings were allowed expression, the artists and public were eager for new ideas and styles in art. The French Exhibition was like a breath of fresh air with European realist masterpieces in a genre that was acceptable and well suited to China’s political conditions after the Cultural Revolution. In contrast to the visual images produced in China at the time, the images of people in their ordinary life and the farmers in their natural surroundings, such as those depicted in Millet’s and Bastien-

²¹² Works displayed in this exhibition included Théodore Rousseau *Paysage du Jura / La descente des vaches*, 1836, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot *A path under the trees in the spring*, 1860-70, Jean-Francois Millet *A Fiadeira*, 1868, Jules Bastien-Lepage *Haymaking*, 1877, Gustave Courbet *Paysage sous la neige*, 1867, Alfred Sisley *The Lane of Poplars at Moret-sur-Loing*, 1890, Claude Monet *Valley of the Creuse*, 1889, Pierre-Auguste Renoir *The Banks of the Seine Champrosay*, 1876, Paul Gauguin *Washerwomen at Pont-Aven*, 1886, and André Derain *Barges*, 1903, to list a few. The exhibition was accompanied by a simple exhibition catalogue produced in Chinese. The National Art Museum of China produced a booklet with artists’ profiles and information on each exhibit that was marked for “professional use” that indicated the booklet/catalogue was only distributed amongst art professionals during the exhibition. The details of the art and artists’ information was not available to the general public. This reflected the social and political conditions of that period in China. These two catalogues are now accessible online at <<http://aaa.org.hk>>.

²¹³ People had to queue up to two days to obtain the entry tickets for the exhibition. I recall my brother and his friends took turns in queuing to buy tickets and I was very lucky that my brother and friends had a spare ticket for me. There have been many articles published in Chinese over the years with personal accounts of the French Exhibition. For example, see Wu Zuoren, “Deep Friendship and Wonderful Style,” in *Fine Art* 3 (1978): 41-43, 46; Shao Dazhen, ed., 《万山红遍—新中国美术 60 年访谈录》 [*Red Prevailed Thousands of Mountains: Interviews on Sixty Years of New China Art*] (Beijing: People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 2009).

Lepage's paintings, brought warm human feelings to the hearts of thousands of Chinese visitors. (Figure 33.) The vivid and colourful characters or landscapes of the small number of



Figure 33. Jean-Francois Millet, *Feeding the Young*, 1872.
Oil on canvas, 74 x 60 cm.

impressionist paintings served as a catalyst in changing the political and cultural environment in China. Many artists today still have a vivid memory of this French Exhibition and the era of the “Cultural Fever/Craze” phenomenon that emerged subsequently. For example, a key Shanghai artist of the Native Soil movement, Chen Danqing 陈丹青, was inspired by the masterpieces in the Exhibition when he was creating his *Tibet Series*.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ In 1980 during his time as a post-graduate student at the CAFA Chen produced the *Tibet* series. This group of seven oil paintings were displayed at his graduation exhibition and immediately attracted the attention of professionals, art critics and the public. It was regarded as a new genre that broke away from the official mode of art forms after the Cultural Revolution. In an interview between the academic Wang Duanling 王端廷 and Chen Danqing on Chen's artistic career in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chen explained how the French Exhibition influenced his artistic pursuit during the period when he produced the *Tibet* series oil paintings Chen said in the interview with Wang: “I realized, in fact, many years later the simplest reason [for creating] the *Tibet* series - one that everyone including me had ignored. It was the first time since the Cultural Revolution, and the start of my studies at the Central Art Academy in 1978, that a French art exhibition had been invited. [...] In that exhibition, I saw original works of Courbet, Corot and the artist's Haystacks series. To a painter, this was very important [...]. From the age of 18 to 25, all the heroes I followed from afar or close by were in the Soviet art style with big scenes, group characters, drama and tragedy. When the French Rural Painting exhibition came, however, it decisively changed my whole public aesthetic and private aesthetic taste [...]. The *Tibet* series was



Figure 34. Chen Danqing, *Mother and Child* 《母与子》, 1979-1980. Oil on canvas.

(Figure. 34) The impact of the exhibition was also felt by internationally acclaimed contemporary Chinese artist Huang Yongping, who visited the French Exhibition in Shanghai from Xiamen, Fujian province in 1978. After he graduated from the Zhejiang Fine Art Academy and returned to Xiamen in 1983, Huang made a painting after the French painting *Haymakers* by Jules Bastien-Lepage (Figure 35.) in a monotone colour. The picture frame is an integral part of the artwork. The main female character's face was covered a half mask with her left foot coming out of the picture frame.²¹⁵ (Figure 36.)

an aesthetic conversion. A small painted scene without content, theme, plot or story, and many small painted scenes consisting of people's lifestyles, this was what I got from the French Rural Painting [Exhibition]." See a discussion on this art trend in the early section of this chapter under the heading of "*National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Art of the 1980s*." [See Wang Duanting, "人道主义就是一张脸——陈丹青谈《西藏组画》," <http://news.artron.net/show_news.php?newid=150202&column_idcould=10#DS>, viewed 18 August 2011]. This was originally published in: Shao Dazhen, ed., *Red Prevailed Thousands of Mountains: Interviews on Sixty Years of New China Art*.] The original Chinese of the quotation: "过了很多年以后我才想起来,《西藏组画》有个最简单的原因,谁都忽略了,连我自己都忽略了,就是在1978年我考上美院以前,文革后第一次请来了法国人的画展。""我第一次在这个展览上看到了库尔贝、科罗、画《草垛》的等画家的原作,这对画画的人来说非常关键。"".....所以在十八岁到二十五岁,我所有仿效的英雄无论是远的还是近的都是苏联绘画,大场面、群像、悲剧感、戏剧性,可是法国乡村画展一来决定性地扭转了我整个的公共美学和私人美学。.....《西藏组画》只是完成了一个美学转换,即无内容、无主题、无情节、无故事的一个小画面,而且由很多小画面组成的生活形态,这是法国乡村画展给我的。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

²¹⁵ Jane DeBevoise, *Conversation with Huang Yongping* (New York: MoMA and Asia Art Archive, October 2010). <<http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/conversation-with-huang-yongping>>, viewed 03/07/2016.



Figure 35. Haymakers (Les Foins) by Jules Bastien-Lepage, 1878 (left);
Figure 36. Les Foins by Huang Yongping, 1983 (right).

The details of how the French Exhibition was conceived and the curatorial and selection process negotiated between French and Chinese officials remain unclear due to limited access to public information.²¹⁶ In the Foreword to the catalogue the exhibition's General Commissioner and the Deputy Director of Cultural Affairs of the City of Paris, Dominique Bono first stated the significance of this French Exhibition, that it was the first French art exhibition in China since 1949. Before explaining the curatorial intention, he affirmed the "uniqueness and irreplaceable" nature of individual creative work as "each painting illustrates our artistic view." The curatorial theme for the landscape paintings was intended to reflect major changes in art trends in a period of rapid development that saw France transformed from a traditional agrarian country into an industrial society in the nineteenth century.²¹⁷ The selection of the artworks showed careful consideration to suit the Chinese political and cultural conditions of the time. The exhibition's theme, with the words "rural"

²¹⁶ The Shanghai Art Museum's Archive only had a simple statement indicating the exhibition was an official programme. The catalogue produced in Chinese for the exhibition by NAMOC includes three articles from the French side: a Preface by the French Foreign Minister Louis de Guiringaud, a Foreword by the exhibition's General Commissioner and the Deputy Director of Cultural Affairs of the City of Paris, Dominique Bono (sic.), and four pages of Introduction by Jacques Whelan of the French National Museums Administration Bureau. One expert raised the possibility of the person's name Dominique Bono may be Dominique Bozo. However, the Chinese exhibition catalogue showed clearly its original phonetic translation in Chinese characters. In this thesis, the English names and the position titles of these three essayists are translated from the Chinese exhibition catalogue by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. It also includes a list of all the exhibits with artists' names, images and where the exhibits had been loaned. There were no essays from the Chinese side in the catalogue. Most of the information about the selection process came from these three catalogue essays. (See also some information of this exhibition on <<http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/6980/10293/0/15229>>.)

²¹⁷ Dominique Bono, "Foreword," in the exhibition catalogue *Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century* (Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, and NAMOC 1978), pp.1-2.

and “landscape paintings” in its title, neatly avoided the political sensitivity in China regarding artworks with a direct reference to a period of significant political, economic and cultural changes in France. In the exhibition, one could enjoy and become absorbed in the heart-warming paintings by the Barbizon School artists and the realists. It was precisely in tune with the historical moment in China. What was interesting about the Exhibition was the inclusion of a small number of impressionist and fauvist paintings, as impressionist art had been rejected as capitalist bourgeois art since the establishment of the New China in 1949. This touch of modernism delicately reconnected with the early modernism movement in Shanghai in the 1930s, and inspired many in searching for artistic directions or in dealing with contemporary art issues in subsequent years. The distinctive presence of impressionist style art in the unofficial exhibition of the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition*, which I have discussed earlier in this chapter, emerged in Shanghai a year after the French exhibition and, I argue, reflected this kind of reconnection. The *Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century* marked the beginning of a new era of Western modern art exhibitions in China. This exhibition along with other international art exhibitions during this period had an impact at various levels on local art.²¹⁸

American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Among the stream of international exhibitions in the 1980s, the exhibition of *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* in October 1981 had a transformative effect on Shanghai’s art community. The exhibition was a result of the cultural agreement signed between the governments of the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China following the establishment of diplomatic relations in January 1979. Held at the old Shanghai Museum building, it was the first US art exhibition to the New China following a Chinese archaeological exhibition to the US. The catalogue, which was fully translated into Chinese, contained a preface by President Ronald Reagan in which he highlighted the diversity of the art in this exhibition as characteristic of the American people, reflecting their

²¹⁸ In the 1980s, there was a stream of international art exhibitions shown in Shanghai including: *The Art of French Modern Artist Jean Hélion* exhibition in 1980; the *American Paintings From the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* exhibition in October 1981; the *250 Years of French Art* exhibition in October 1982; the *Picasso* exhibition in June 1983; *Italian Renaissance Art* in August 1983; the *Australian Landscape Paintings* exhibition in November 1983; the *Australian Artist Fred Williams* exhibition in August 1985; the *19th Century German Art* exhibition in September 1985; *French Modern Art* exhibition in October 1985; numerous exchange exhibitions from Japan, and the list could go on. The two exhibitions *Australian Landscape Paintings* (1984) and *Australian Artist Fred Williams* (1985) were the first significant Australian art exhibitions to tour China after formalising diplomatic relations (1972) and the signing of the Agreement on Cultural Cooperation between Australia and the People’s Republic of China in April 1981.

individual creativity and imagination.²¹⁹ The exhibition showcased 70 paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts collection in Boston, ranging from seventeenth-century European paintings right up to mid-twentieth-century American abstraction. The portraiture of James Abbott McNeill Whistler *Symphony in Red*, 1867-1870, John S. Sargent *Edith, Lady Playfair*, 1884, and Winslow Homer *The Lookout – “All’s well”*, 1896 attracted a wide audience. The abstract works of John Marin (*Movement – Sea or Mountain as you will*, 1947. Oil on canvas), Jackson Pollock (See Figure 37.), Hans Hofmann (See Figure 38.), Franz Kline (See Figure 39.), Morris Louis (*Alioth*, 1962. Gouache on canvas), Friedel Dzubas (*Elmslight*, 1971, gouache on canvas), Helen Frankenthaler (See Figure 40.), and Jules Olitski, (*Natural History 1*, gouache on canvas.), were the first American abstract artworks shown in public in China and were influential for many young local artists.



Figure 37. Jackson Pollock, *Number 10*, 1949. Oil on canvas.



Figure 38. Hans Hofmann, *Twilight*, 1957. Oil on canvas.



Figure 39. Franz Kline, *Probst 1*, 1961. Oil on canvas.

With diverse art exhibitions being shown in China at the end of the 1970s, it could be expected that there was some resistance from Chinese officials against certain types of art.

²¹⁹ The exhibition catalogue can be viewed from AAA website: <www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/Collectiononline/SpecialCollectionitem/6884>, viewed 17 May 2012.



Figure 40. Helen Frankenthaler, *Ocean Desert*, 1975. Gouache on canvas.

At the time of the preparations for this exhibition, Meredith Palmer, a young American official, was the key liaison between the US and Chinese governments, as well as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.²²⁰ She recalled the unease on the Chinese side about thirteen exhibits, although she did not specify the works, there was sensitivity about exhibiting the nude and abstract art. Negotiations were carried out to maintain the integrity of the exhibition and in the end no changes were made to the original exhibition checklist.²²¹

In an exhibition review published in the periodical *World Affairs* 《世界知识》 in 1981, CAFA art academic Shao Dazhen condensed all the information from the exhibition catalogue into an editorial column, and with a common writing strategy adopted by most writers in the 1970s and 1980s in China, critically introduced the American abstract art movement and explained the formation of Western abstractionism as follows.

The emergence and development of abstract art has its complicated social reasons. It is closely related to the alienation of capitalist society, the individualism of social ideas, and subjective idealism in philosophical thought. Of course, there are factors including how to apply modern scientific and technological achievements to art or in art creation process, and how to explore an art form with a modern sense. It can be said

²²⁰ Meredith Palmer, interview with Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 September 2011). An interview with art critic Shao Dazhen conducted by AAA confirmed that this incident did occur when the exhibits arrived at the National Art Museum of China. The large abstract paintings attracted the attention of officials. Shao was involved in the pre-approving process of the exhibition catalogue. All the exhibits were approved in the previous processes. Apparently, it was Deng Xiaoping who was required to give the final approval before the exhibition could go ahead. The opening was delayed for about forty minutes to an hour according to Shao. See *Interview: Shao Dazhen*, AAA 2009. <<http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/Twelve287>>, viewed 07 September 2014.

²²¹ *ibid.*

that it is a kind of special reflection on the state of modern life of the spirit in the West. We can regard it as a social phenomenon and a literary phenomenon to be studied.²²²

The exhibition received a similar public response to that of the previous *Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century*. It drew visitors from all over China to Beijing at the National Art Museum of China and to Shanghai at the Shanghai Museum, and had substantial exposure during its three months on exhibition. While the details of the artworks may have faded, overall the abstract art left an imprint in the minds of many artists in Shanghai. During the last ten years, there have been many interviews by media and art critics with artists from the 1980s on this exhibition. For example, the prominent Shanghai abstractionist Ding Yi has often stated that during his formative years as a young art student this exhibition was the first time he saw original Western abstraction, and explains how important its influence was for him and his colleagues including Yu Youhan, Feng Lianghong, and Wang Ziwei.²²³ Emerging artists such as Qiu Deshu 仇德树, Sun Liang 孙良, Zhou Changjiang 周长江, Cha Guojun 查国钧 and many others from the local art community who had a strong interest in abstract art, and who have continued practicing abstract art since 1980s, benefitted greatly from this “first sight” experience of the exhibition.²²⁴

In some respects, the French exhibition reconnected artists in China with early Chinese modernist art. The American exhibition with its abstract art elicited different levels of response in artistic practices from various places and cities in China in the early 1980s.²²⁵ Avant-garde art in Shanghai from the early 1980s has, I argue, a strong tendency towards abstraction. This art trend was analysed from both philosophical and social perspectives in association with the modern urban environment of Shanghai by Chinese critics and art historians in the art discourse in the 1980s. Since the 1980s, abstract art has become one of

²²² Shao Dazhen, “从波士顿画展看美国绘画发展历史” [“View the Journey of American Paintings Development from Boston Paintings Exhibition”], in *World Affairs* 20 (1981). English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. Shao Dazhen is a prominent art historian and critic in China and a Professor at CAFA. He studied art history at an art school in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) from 1955 to 1960. After returning to China, he became a Professor of art history at the CAFA in Beijing. Shao has also been the secretary of the Chinese Artists Association and the Director of its Theory Committee. He was editor of both *World Art* and *Meishu* magazines in the 1980s.

²²³ Cao Weijun, “The Magician of Crosses,” in *Art China* 5 (2008): 76-79.

²²⁴ This impact resonated in my interviews with case study artists in this thesis, as well as in the major research program of interviews with artists by AAA that were initiated in 2008. [See in Biljana Ciric, *History in the Making, Shanghai 1979-2009: Artists Interviews & Works Archives* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 2010); also see interviews in AAA “Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990” research project at <<http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionFolder/1683>>, viewed 02 February 2010.]

²²⁵ It goes without saying how popular realism or social realism art in both exhibitions was for general viewers in China.

the distinctive features of the contemporary art scene in Shanghai. One may raise the question: Why did artists in Shanghai respond to this exhibition with such an immediate affinity with abstract art?

Commentators in China have often tried to answer this question in more general terms.²²⁶ They hypothesise that it may be because Shanghai has a cosmopolitan city environment with a modern life style, or perhaps the city's link to its semi-colonial history and that early Western influence predisposes it to modern art forms. In the Introduction of this thesis, I have argued that the legacy of the early twentieth-century modernist movement in Shanghai was the link and that the spirit of individualism in Shanghai avant-garde art in the 1980s led to a fast transition from modernist to postmodernist art and to explore experimental art practices as opposed to main stream official art. The enthusiastic response to American abstract art by the Shanghai art community was an example.²²⁷ In a catalogue essay "Abstraction, An Old Topic" for the *Metaphysics 2001: Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition*, the curator Li Xu 李旭 described abstraction from the perspectives of "a concept", "a style", and "an attitude" in a Western art historical context.

[...] Abstraction should be a method of artists' consideration and expression. It would not gain extra lustre because of the depicted objects, or age with the variation of creation times. Like Music, it exceeds races, regions, conventions and human cultural backgrounds and becomes a really "international language."²²⁸

In the case of abstract art in Shanghai, especially in the early 1980s, it was, I argue, certainly a political choice of the artists drawn to this art form in order to distance themselves from official art and also away from various new trends, at the time, offering social and political commentary. This kind of attitude and choice of abstract art was enacted as avant-garde in the Shanghai art scene, particularly in the first half of the 1980s, as I have argued elsewhere in this thesis. For example, Li Xu began to show interest in the phenomenon of abstract art in Shanghai not long after he joined the Shanghai Art Museum in the late 1980s. He curated a number of abstract art exhibitions during the 1990s, including the *Invisible Existence* exhibition at the art space of the Shanghai University School of Art in 1997. The *Metaphysics 2001: Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition* was the first in a series of

²²⁶ See in Li Xu, "抽象艺术的中国问题与多元之路" ["The Chinese Problem of Abstract Art and the Road of Pluralism"], a public lecture at Shanghai Minsheng Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, 2016. <<http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/xNmoMSiuHWdKW6PfYaLPw>>, viewed 26 November 2016; English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

²²⁷ Reference here is to the abstract art in the exhibition of *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* at the Shanghai Museum in October 1981.

²²⁸ Li Xu, "Abstraction, An Old Topic," *Metaphysics 2001: Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition*, exh Cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 2001), p.6. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

survey exhibitions on Shanghai abstract art that Li Xu curated at the Shanghai Art Museum in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2005. This series of survey exhibitions was the first exhibition program focusing on abstract art in a public art museum in China.²²⁹

In this chapter, within the context of my analysis of the national art discourse, I have also argued that the artists in Shanghai used self-organised exhibitions as a means of participation in the contemporary art discourse in the 1980s within an environment that lacked other avenues for local artistic discourse. The public art institutions and the associated exhibitions are critical sources for the study of how the artists played their roles in the Shanghai avant-garde art scene and added a local Shanghai voice to the national contemporary art scene. I have argued that the Shanghai unofficial art exhibitions I have discussed in this chapter were precursors in developments in the contemporary Chinese art scene in the 1980s. The social fabric of Shanghai, I argue, has been a hotbed for the spirit of individualism that was reflected in grassroots community art organisations such as Cultural Centres and Workers' Clubs as well as more formal institutions and in the art discourse and exhibitions. In the following chapter, I will examine the Shanghai Art Museum and the critical art exhibitions held at that museum during the 1980s.

²²⁹ Each exhibition was accompanied with a seminar that provided a discussion forum for artists and art critics. The discussion papers were usually published in the Museum's newsletter, but some have been published in the local art magazine *Art China*. (See in Li Xu, "The Chinese Problem of Abstract Art and the Road of Pluralism," a public lecture at Shanghai Minsheng Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, 2016.)

Chapter 2.

The Shanghai Art Museum – Bureaucratic System and Individual Influence (1979 – 1989)

This chapter will take a museological approach in examining the role of the Shanghai Art Museum (SAM) in the transformation not only of contemporary art in Shanghai but also of the modern art museum in China. To demonstrate how SAM stood out among all other art museums in the country at the time, this chapter will explore the role of key individuals who were involved in creating and shaping institutional changes and exerting their influence within the bureaucracy and art institutions to engage with avant-garde art and artists during the transitional period of the 1980s.²³⁰ Their actions resonated with the spirit of individualism, which I have previously identified as characteristic of avant-garde art in Shanghai.

Drawing on primary source materials, interviews and my involvement as a participant in various art activities, I will examine key exhibitions from a museological point of view to highlight the significant changes in the Museum's practices and its approaches to contemporary art and exhibitions during this period. Those changes, I argue, allowed SAM to be the forerunner among the public art museums in China in curatorial and museum practices in the 1980s. To recognise fully the significance of the individuals who brought about changes within SAM during this period, it is important to comprehend the issues stemming from the political and bureaucratic structures organisations such as SAM had operated under in China after 1949. It is also necessary to investigate how SAM could develop in a way that was different from other institutions in China and in the process was able to support contemporary art and artists. Such an in-depth study of SAM has not been undertaken in the academic field either in China or elsewhere.

The following section will examine China's political and bureaucratic system under which art museums were structured and the context and environment in which art administrators worked during the 1980s. It shows how some individuals were able to use their influence to bring about important institutional changes in Shanghai under the central government's political and economic "reform and opening-up" policy.²³¹ My analysis aims to provide new insights into how artists and art administrators operated within a restrictive

²³⁰ In footnote 1 of the Introduction, I defined the 1980s as a period of transition from modern to contemporary art in the context of how the term "avant-garde" is used in this thesis.

²³¹ For more contextual discussion on those critical times and the Government's "reform and opening-up" policy, see in the Introduction and the beginning of Chapter 1.

environment to implement changes. Thus, this thesis intends to fill a void in existing scholarship by examining as a special case study the Shanghai Art Museum and the individuals who played a leading role in that institution during the 1980s.

Political and Bureaucratic Structures in the 1980s

The role played by art institutions under the political and bureaucratic structures of the 1980s in the growth of contemporary art in post Cultural Revolution China has attracted increasing attention from international art historians. Nevertheless, writings relating to this subject have mostly focused not on art museums but on the Chinese artists' associations, the art education institutions and the publishing houses that produced art magazines, journals and art newspapers.²³² The influential players from those institutions during the late 1970s and the 1980s were based outside Shanghai and were all affiliated to official art institutions such as the China Academy of Arts (Hangzhou), the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), China Artists Association (CAA) (Beijing), and the Hubei Branch of China Artists Association (HBCAA).²³³ Since 2000 there has been greater attention given by art historians and critics to the role of art museums in the changes in modern and contemporary art.²³⁴

²³² From the discussions related to this subject in international literature, see: E. Perry Link, *Roses and Thorns: the second blooming of the Hundred Flowers in Chinese fiction, 1979-80* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Geremie R. Barmé and John Minford, eds. *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (Hong Kong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1986); Jerome Silbergeld, *Contradiction: Artistic Life, Socialist Country, and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng*, (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1993); Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); John A. Clark, *Modernities of Chinese Art* (Leiden; Boston: Brill Publishing House, 2010); Julia Frances Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

²³³ Key players include: the editors of *Meishu* 《美术》 Li Xianting (1979-1983) and Gao Minglu (1984-1989) based in Beijing; Li Xianting, the editor of the *Fine Arts in China newspaper* 《中国美术报》, (1985-1989) based in Beijing; Fei Dawei, editor of the academic journal *Fine Art Research* 《美术研究》 (1985-1988) based in Beijing; Fan Jingzhong 范景中, editor of the popular art magazine *Foreign Fine Art Materials* 《外国美术资料》 and *Fine Art Translation Series* 《美术译丛》 (1981-1987) based in Hangzhou 杭州; and Peng De 彭德, editor of the *Art Trends* 《美术思潮》 (1984-1987) based in Wuhan 武汉. In Chapter 1 I have discussed the reasons for Shanghai's less formal art discourse and argued that the individual interactions between artists, writers and administrators from art institutions in the city by contrast formed an informal network and created what I have termed a "studio discourse" in that period. (See the discussion in Chapter 1 under the subheading "National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s.")

²³⁴ The most notable writings in this regard from mainland China, see: Lü Peng, 《二十世纪中国艺术史》 [A History of Art in Twentieth-Century China] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2006); Cao Yiqiang, "美术馆与新旧博物馆学" ["Art Museum and Old and New Museology"], in *Meishuguan [Art Museum]*, edition A (Shanghai: Shanghai Book Store Press, 2007); Cao Yiqiang, "美术博物馆的定义与国际学术现状" ["Definition of Art Museum and International Academic Status Quo"], in *Xinmeishu [New Fine Art]*, Vol.29, no.1 (2008): pp.38-50;

Nonetheless, the contribution of individuals in Shanghai and their influence within the art institutions have not been adequately examined in the discourse either in China or elsewhere up to the present.

Before analysing the role of key individuals in the Shanghai Art Museum, there is a need to examine the approaches through which scholars have attempted to understand the structures underpinning art institutions in China. There have been general acknowledgments from writers in China of the significance of individuals affiliated with art organisations and their contributions to the evolution of contemporary Chinese art during the late 1970s and the 1980s.²³⁵ However, such general acknowledgments were usually without further in-depth analysis due to the political sensitivity.

International scholars have examined this issue from various perspectives - Perry Link from the perspective of Chinese literature and political culture, Julia Andrews from the perspective of Chinese political control in art, and Martina Köppel-Yang who used the framework of semiotics in her analysis of contemporary Chinese art. They have all attempted to demystify the political dynamics within the system in China.²³⁶ For example, in her seminal publication *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* published in 1994, Julia Andrews explored "some of the administrative structures that were

Yu Ding, "试论 1949 年以来中国美术体制的发展与管理的变迁" ["On the Changes of the Development and Management of Chinese Art System since 1949"], in *Meishu [Art]*, no.4 (2010): 100-104; Lu Hong, 《中国当代艺术史, 1978-2008》 [*History of Chinese Contemporary Art, 1978-2008*] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Art Publishing House, 2014); Lin Zao, "中国美术馆: 历史缘起, 命名定位与文化精神" ["National Art Museum of China: Historical Origin, Naming Orientation and Cultural Spirit"], in *Journal of Guizhou University Art Edition* Vol.30, no.2 (Apr 2016): 58-67; Li Wanwan 李万万, 《美术馆的历史: 中国近现代美术馆发展之研究, 1840-1949》 [*History of Art Museums in China, 1849-1949*] (Nancang: Jiangxi Fine Art Publishing House, 2016). Title translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

²³⁵ For example, Jiang Feng 江丰, a prominent figure in Beijing, was President of CAA and CAFA (1979-1982) and played a role in art development in China after the Cultural Revolution by giving support to Chinese artists to pursue artistic freedom of expression, including in such events of the *Stars* exhibitions. He has been written about in numerous articles, notably see in: Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement*, p.46; Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare* (Hong Kong, Timezone 8 Limited, 2003), pp.43-44; Galikowski, *Art and Politics*, pp.9-14; Chen Danqing, "江丰老师二、三事," at <<https://www.douban.com/group/topic/9679935/>>, viewed 10 April 2016. Jiang was originally from Shanghai and a member of the Leftist group in the 1930s and part of the early-generation modernists. He participated in the "woodcut workshop" held by Lu Xun in Shanghai in 1931. During the Anti-Rightists Campaign in 1957 he was purged and was finally rehabilitated in 1979 under Deng Xiaoping's reform policy when he regained his position. His article "关于中国画的一封信" ["A Letter About Chinese Paintings"] published in *Meishu* no.11 (1979), provided an important criticism in the discourse at that time.

²³⁶ See Perry Link, *Roses and Thorns*, 1984; Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*; Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*.

used by the Communist Party to promote and control new painting.”²³⁷ She pointed out that the Party promoted its ideological art mainly through three “administrative structures”: the art academies in Beijing and Hangzhou; the Chinese Artists Association (CAA); and the art publishing system.²³⁸ Andrews’ influential analysis of the relationship between artists and the political bureaucratic system is highly relevant to this thesis in its exploration of the cultural history and art in China from 1949 to 1979.

In the Introduction to this thesis, I discussed the modernist movement in early twentieth-century China with a focus on Shanghai under the CCP regime after 1949 and prior to 1978.²³⁹ In the following section of this chapter, I will first discuss some issues in the discourse, which derived from the intricate Chinese political and bureaucratic system, and then map out this system. Introduced in December 1978, a critical reform in personnel policy known as “political rehabilitation” (政治平反) resulted in many top or high level positions in the official system, including art administration, being assigned to or reclaimed by the victims of the Cultural Revolution and the Anti-Rightists Campaign (1957) in the post-Cultural Revolution period.²⁴⁰ Publications, including those by Galikowski (1998) and Köppel-Yang (2003), have illustrated this change using as examples institutions such as the Chinese Artists Association and the publishing institutions together with influential figures and art

²³⁷ Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, p.4. In this publication, Andrews’ investigates how Chinese art in the post-1949 period was shaped by the CCP to serve its political and social agenda, and how artists responded within this ideological framework. Andrews’ book was awarded the Joseph Levenson Book Prize by the Association of Asian Studies (USA).

²³⁸ *ibid.*

²³⁹ See in Introduction under the subheading “The Spirit of Individualism in the Chinese Modern and Contemporary Art Context.”

²⁴⁰ In the context of political changes in China, a critical reform was the institutional personnel policy in the Party’s early reform package. The period after the Cultural Revolution from 1976 - 1981 was regarded in political terms as “拨乱反正” [Bring order out of chaos], marked by Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang’s opposition to the policy of “两个凡是” (The Two Whatevers: Whatever Chairman Mao said, we will say and whatever Chairman Mao did, we will do) by Hua Guofeng, the Party Chairman at the time. Deng and Hu started the campaign to rehabilitate many people purged by previous political movements such as in the Anti-Rightists Campaign and the Cultural Revolution, and even from some major cases in the 1930s and 1940s. The Political Rehabilitation policy was formally announced at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CCP Central Committee in December 1978. It was reinforced by passing the document titled “关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议” [“Resolutions on Some Historical Issues of the Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China”] at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh CCP Central Committee in June 1981 criticising the Party’s far-left policy that led to the Cultural Revolution. The rehabilitation policy was not only for Party members, but also for victims across the spectrum of Chinese society. The rehabilitation process officially finished in 1985. (See “平反冤假错案工作” [“Rehabilitation of Unjust, Falsified and Mistaken Cases”] at 当代中国研究所 [Contemporary China Research Institute] website <http://www.hprc.org.cn/gsgl/dsnb/zds200908/t20090820_28320.html>, viewed 31 March 2018. Some related policies that had an impact on the cultural and art scene in China during this period have been discussed in Introduction, pp.7-8. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

activities including the works of aspirational young writers.²⁴¹ They have effectively analysed the dynamic of central political power and its relations with cultural institutions. However, these scholars focused mainly on Beijing. In a vast country like China, with diverse local social and cultural histories in regions and cities, a Beijing-focused analysis cannot adequately reflect the situation of the arts and culture in cities such as Shanghai. In the following sections, I will examine in some depth the very different context of Shanghai.

In her study of the relationship between artistic discourse and politics in China, Galikowski observes that since the inception of the Party in the 1920s, art has been a vital propaganda tool for the implementation of Party ideology and therefore has been placed in a special position in the Party's governing framework.²⁴² According to Köppel-Yang, whose study focuses on the art bureaucracy in China in the late 1970s and 1980s, "the art of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1970s and 1980s is, like the literature of that period, not an underground art. It developed within the official institutional structure and, in part, with the support of official institutions."²⁴³ Köppel-Yang further argues that the structural feature of the art bureaucracy in that period was of a centralised system but divided into two parallel structures: one being the Chinese Artists Association, a branch of the China National Federation of Literary and Arts Circles, which is subject to the direction of the Communist Party; and the other being the Ministry of Culture, an administrative organisation under the State Council. Köppel-Yang defines the first as part of "an organ of the Propaganda Department" of the Communist Party, and the second as "responsible to the civil government". According to Köppel-Yang, such a division led to the rise of "niches" which, together with other factors, made it possible for alternative ideological and artistic positions to subsist within the official system.²⁴⁴ Köppel-Yang uses the concept of "niches" to argue that not only was the Chinese avant-garde art in the late 1970s and 1980s "not an underground art", but it also "developed within the official institutional structure."²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ See in Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, pp.40-44; Galikowski, *Art and Politics*, pp.176-180.

²⁴² See Galikowski, *Art and Politics*, pp.3-6.

²⁴³ Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, p.40. Referring to Perry Link's analysis of the reasons why Chinese writers and intellectuals worked within the official bureaucracy of that period, Köppel-Yang finds Link's analysis cannot explain "the range of the development of alternative art within the official system." She points out that there is an unanswered question in "which particular features made the existence and the development of avant-garde art within the official bureaucracy possible?" See also Perry Link, *Roses and Thorns*, pp. 20, 31.

²⁴⁴ Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, p.41. In this publication, Köppel-Yang stated: "It is this division of the art bureaucracy into two parallel structures that, in periods of reorientation and relative ideological liberalism, such as the late 1970s and the early 1980s, or the early 1950s and early 1960s, enhances the emergence of niches within the official system – niches in which alternative ideological and artistic positions can subsist."

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*

The problem in Köppel-Yang's argument regarding 'niches' begins with the premise that institutions within the arts bureaucracy are differentiated between the Party apparatus and the civil government. In the case of the Chinese political system, however, there should be no illusion about the relationship between the Communist Party and the governmental administrative organisations, or any assumption that there are differences between these institutions politically. Since coming into power in 1949, the Party has always been the government. All organisations or institutions are controlled by the Party to promote and implement its ideology. To emphasise this crucial point visually, I provide two diagrams on the Chinese bureaucratic structure of cultural organisations with a focus on Shanghai from 1949 to 1979 and from the 1980s as Appendix 2 of this thesis.²⁴⁶ Party units and members are represented in all organisations even down to work units' level, and Party directives are implemented through this far-reaching mechanism for the entire country. Many senior or important positions in the official system including the art bureaucracy are occupied by Party members. In fact, Party membership is one of the selection criteria for those positions except a few special cases in the 1980s such as the appointment of Professor Fang Zengxian, a non-party member, as director of the Shanghai Art Museum.²⁴⁷ Even the victims of previous political purges, who were rehabilitated and reclaimed high-level positions in the official system in the late 1970s and 1980s, were mostly Party members, although they were liberal-minded.²⁴⁸ Quite often, high-level personnel changed and moved within and across the system. The Party ensures that all official organisations or institutions are in line with the Party's directives through its party membership system. Not until the 1990s did the Party's reform policy start to loosen its grip on the organisational structure to fit its economic development mandate.²⁴⁹ Hence, the insertion of "niches" into such a structure was not convincing.²⁵⁰

Taking a different position from Köppel-Yang, Slovenian art critic Ales Erjavec stresses the importance of individual ideas. His comments on the former Soviet bloc are also relevant to the situation in China. According to Erjavec, "in the former Soviet bloc countries, culture

²⁴⁶ See Appendix 2. These diagrams are drawn from my extensive research and collection of materials on historical records from governmental organisations websites, Office of Shanghai Chronicles website, as well as my own experience and first-hand knowledge working in an art institution (SAM) during the 1980s.

²⁴⁷ In my personal experience having lived in China through the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, this was an unwritten rule in personnel policy in all organisations and was public knowledge.

²⁴⁸ The terms liberal-minded and open-minded used in this thesis refers to people in the Party and the official system who were open to or tolerant of new ideas.

²⁴⁹ See Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (California: University of California Press, 1996); Perry Link, ed., *Roses and Thorns*, 1984; Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984*, 1998; Xu Hong, "Chinese Art" in *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), pp.340-348. I have witnessed these changes during my time living in China.

²⁵⁰ See footnote 244 for Köppel-Yang's concept of "niches."

and art represented one of the rare venues for expressing political dissent and, just as important, for expressing personal and private views aimed at having an existential and a social impact.”²⁵¹ The features commonly shared by former socialist countries operating under similar political conditions and a comparable system for all organisations and institutions in the 1970s and 1980s are discussed in a collection of essays edited by Erjavec in 2003.²⁵²

Definitions such as “not an underground art” from Köppel-Yang and “unofficial art” from other writers as applied to China’s avant-garde art in the 1980s are critical for our understanding of avant-garde art in China in that period.²⁵³ These definitions are also critical to our understanding of how art institutions, particularly art museums, functioned under China’s political bureaucracy system in the 1980s. In Western democracies, public institutions are considered relatively politically independent from the ruling party in government. In contrast, since 1949, the CCP regime has been a Party nomenklatura system for important posts in the political bureaucratic structure including art organisations such as the CAA.²⁵⁴ The public art institutions, therefore, cannot be independent from the political system.²⁵⁵ The Party’s change of policy towards economic development after the Cultural Revolution only created the illusion that its bureaucratic structure supported the emergence of avant-garde art in China. Nevertheless, there were significant changes within the bureaucratic structure in the late 1970s and the 1980s that proved conducive to the development of contemporary art. My research showed that these changes were brought

²⁵¹ Ales Erjavec, ed. *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, p.13. He used the “Binary” concept to explain how the characteristics of the artists and art institutions functioned within the Communist political environment in Eastern Europe. (See Ales Erjavec, ed., *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, p.44.)

²⁵² Ales Erjavec, ed., *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition - Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (California: University of California Press, 2003). The contributors to this publication included Ales Erjavec, Martin Jay, Boris Groys, Misko Suvakovic, Peter Gyorgy, Gerardo Mosquera, and Gao Minglu. There have been substantial academic studies conducted in this area since the late 1980s, for examples, see David Elliott, *Rodchenko and Arts of Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979); Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charls Rogle (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, trans. Gabriele Leupold (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 2008).

²⁵³ There is a wide range of materials related to those definitions by writers in China and internationally. See example of the authors listed in following footnote 258 in this chapter.

²⁵⁴ John Clark, “‘Avant-Garde’ Art Groups in China, 1979–1989: The Stars—The Northern Art Group—The Pond Association—Xiamen Dada: A Critical Polylogue,” by Paul Gladston,” in *The China Journal* no. 72 (2014): 223-225. See also Paul Gladston, Ellen Thomas, Shu Qun, Bethan Ball, and ProQuest (Firm), *“Avant-Garde” Art Groups in China, 1979–1989* (Bristol, England; Chicago, Illinois: Intellect, 2013).

²⁵⁵ This is clearly displayed in the arts bureaucracy structure diagrams provided in Appendix 2. In Chapter 1, I have discussed art education institutions, community cultural centres, and workers’ clubs in Shanghai under the political system where individuals had made contributions to changes within those institutions.

about not by the Party system or ideology, but by individuals who held influential positions in the official art organisations during that period.

For artists and critics inside China, the argument is very much about the definition of avant-garde and unofficial art in the 1980s.²⁵⁶ It is also about how to view the relationship between avant-garde artists and critics and the official institutional structure in China's political system during that period. At the beginning of his anthology entitled "On The Mid-Ground", art critic and curator Hou Hanru defines China's avant-garde art of the 1980s as an "unofficial art":

[...] Most of the artists involved in China's avant-garde movement of the 1980s shared the same motivation: to break down the constraints of the authority of official discourse and reclaim freedom of expression. The 'task' that they were confronted [with] was to reveal how reality from political and social life, to cultural life, from person life[sic], from personal life to everyday circumstances, has been deformed and misdirected by such official discourses and how freedom of thinking has been oppressed by ideology. Therefore, Avant-garde art has been naturally defined as an "unofficial art."²⁵⁷

He also points out that "since the 1980s, the Chinese contemporary art movement has centred on one axis, the problem of ideology. More exactly, this movement itself arose and subsequently developed as a "resistance to official ideology."²⁵⁸ In this thesis, I use the term "unofficial art" to describe avant-garde art in Shanghai as opposed to the official art, a concept which has been used by a number of other scholars writing on art in China during this period.²⁵⁹ For example, the term "unofficial art" has also been used to describe the

²⁵⁶ See In Introduction under the heading "The term Avant-garde Art."

²⁵⁷ Hou Hanru, "Towards an 'Un-Unofficial Art': De-ideologicalisation of China's Contemporary Art in the 1990s", (*Third Text*, 34, Spring 1996) in *On The Mid-Ground* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), p.24.

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Among the large volume of material related to this issue of "unofficial art", see Chang Tsong-zung, "Into the Nineties," in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, (exh cat.) ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), p.1; Geremie Barmè, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (New York: An East Gate Book, 1996); Wu Hung, "Editor's Introduction" in *Chinese art at the crossroads: between past and future between East and West* ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2001), pp.8-9; John Clark, "System and Style in the Practice of Chinese Contemporary Art: The Disappearing Exterior?" in *Yishu-Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol.1, no. 2 (August 2002), 13-33; Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2006), pp.151-156; Jiang Jiehong, *Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), p.1; Kuiyi Shen and Julia Frances Andrews, *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985* (New York: New York China Institute Gallery, China institute, 2011), pp.208-210; Wang Minqin, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), p.54. The term "unofficial art" in Chinese "Feiguanfang yishu 非官方艺术"

beginning of contemporary Chinese art (1979-84) in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, an edited volume by Wu Hung.²⁶⁰ It is a common view in China that the avant-garde art of the 1980s is “非官方艺术” meaning “unofficial art” in English. As avant-garde art is by nature in opposition to official art, the official institutional structure did not support the development of avant-garde art in Shanghai in the 1980s.

In China, the modern concept of a museum is closely associated with government policies and notions of national culture and heritage.²⁶¹ This thesis provides an analysis of this association, illustrated by the two structural charts of the Chinese bureaucracy after 1949 in Appendix 2. Briefly, after the Communist Party came to power in 1949, all museums and art museums were placed under the Party’s control and needed the approval of the Party for their programmes. Museums and art museums were designated at the central government level in the capital city of Beijing and the local level of municipal cities and provincial cities.²⁶² Running parallel to the administrative bureaucracy in the cultural area was the Party’s propaganda department, which oversaw the correct implementation of the Party’s directives promoted through the media, cultural activities and the arts, not only at the central level but also at the municipality and provincial levels. The critical role of the Party’s propaganda department in the country’s entire cultural bureaucracy structure has not been revealed even in the otherwise exhaustive studies by for example Xu Hong, Li Wanwan and Lin Zao.²⁶³ Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I will only discuss the Party’s role and influence in the bureaucratic system by focusing on some significant historical events and issues relating to museums and art museums since the founding of new China in 1949.

has not been used often in the publications produced in China due to the government’s censorship, instead it is replaced by simply using the term “Qianwei yishu 前卫艺术” [a literal translation from English “avant-garde art” to Chinese]. Some writers have also expressed critical views on those terms such as “Xiandai Yishu 现代艺术” (Modern Art) and “Feiguanfang yishu 非官方艺术” (unofficial art), and argued from Chinese cultural perspectives, for example, see Gao Minglu, 《另类方法，另类现代：中国当代艺术中的本土文化因素及其现代性转化》 [*Alternative Method, Alternative Modernity: Local Cultural Factors and Modern Transformation in Chinese Contemporary Art*] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2006).

²⁶⁰ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 2010, pp.6-13.

²⁶¹ A recent Chinese publication by Li Wanwan traces the emergence of the modern concept of an art museum and its development in China from 1840 to 1949 using extensive historical materials. See Li Wanwan, *History of Art Museums in China, 1849-1949* (Nancang: Jiangxi Fine Art Publishing House, 2016).

²⁶² Beijing, however, is a unique case in that it is also a municipality with another city-level of art institutions under the central level.

²⁶³ These include, for examples: Perry Link, ed., *Roses and Thorns*; Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*; Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984*; Xu Hong, “Chinese Art”; Li Wanwan, *History of Art Museums in China, 1849-1949*; Lin Zao, “Historical Origin, Naming Orientation and Cultural Spirit of National Art Museum of China.”

Since the first National Cultural Relics and Museums Work Conference (全国文物、博物馆工作会议) in May 1956, museums were placed under the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, and their main policy and tasks were categorised as the collection and display, exhibition, and research of Chinese cultural relics.²⁶⁴ The Shanghai Museum²⁶⁵ has been under the jurisdiction of the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Cultural Heritage (上海市文物局) and the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture (上海市文化局) since its inception in 1952. Museums in China generally relied on government funding for their existence and operational needs. Like everything else, this secure source of funding was interrupted during the Cultural Revolution; however, the general administrative structure remains very much unchanged at the time of writing.

The English terms “art gallery” and “art museum” have been translated into Chinese as “Meishuguan 美术馆”, which means a non-commercial or public art institution with a physical space to display its collections and to hold art exhibitions.²⁶⁶ The term

²⁶⁴ The distinction of museum (Bowuguan 博物馆) and art museum (Meishuguan 美术馆) in the bureaucracy has been critical for an art institution to operate in terms of its functions and obligations. The Chinese term “Bowuguan 博物馆” has a direct English translation as “Museum” which constitutes a clear definition when used in the name of an art institution or in a wider context. (See Cao Yiqiang, “Definition of Art Museum and International Academic Status Quo.”) The museum system and its administrative structure were established in the early days of the PRC as an important component for national cultural representation. The Ministry of Culture convened the first 《全国文物、博物馆工作会议》 [*National Cultural Relics and Museums Work Conference*] in May 1956. During this Conference, museums were divided into three categories with two distinct responsibilities. They were “the institution for science research” (科学研究机关); “the institution for culture and education” (文化教育机关); and “the institution the collections of material culture, natural specimens, spiritual and cultural heritage” (物质文化和精神文化遗产以及自然标本的主要收藏所). Each institution was responsible to “serve scientific research” (为科学研究服务) and “serve to the broad masses” (为广大人民群众服务). (See in “National Cultural Relics and Museums Work Conference” (全国文物、博物馆工作会议纪要), in *Cultural Relics* 文物 no.6 (1956): 9.

<<http://www.ixueshu.com/document/33ea0fdd2b142f52318947a18e7f9386.html>>, viewed 16 April 2018. See also for museums’ main policy and tasks in Lin Zao, “Historical Origin, Naming Orientation and Cultural Spirit of National Art Museum of China”, p.59. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

²⁶⁵ See related discussion in Chapter 1, p.15. Also see Caroline Turner, “Linking Past and Future: Cultural Exchanges and Cross-Cultural Engagements in Four Asian Museums,” in *Humanities Research* Vol.IX, no.1 (2002): 13-28, at pp.13-18.

²⁶⁶ The Chinese term “Meishuguan 美术(术)馆” is not a direct translation from the English term “Art Gallery” or “Art Museum”. The term “Meishu” [Fine Art] in Chinese appeared early in articles from printed materials by Chinese intellectuals about visiting museums in Japan, which indicated the adoption of the Japanese term “Bijitsu 美術” [Fine Art] as both countries used the same characters for this term in the late nineteenth century. The Western concepts of Art Gallery and Art Museum was brought to China by intellectuals and officials who visited museums and art museums in Europe and Japan in the mid nineteenth century, and the terms “美术博物馆” and “美术馆” appeared in the writings and reports on Japan’s participations of European

“Meishuguan” was also used interchangeably with the term “Meishu zhanlanguan 美术展览馆” (Art Exhibition Gallery) in the early twentieth century in China.²⁶⁷ From the 1950s, “Art Galleries” and “Art Exhibition Galleries” have been under the jurisdiction of the Art Division and the Literary and Art Department of the Ministry of Culture. They are administered through the CAA, a subsidiary of a central art organisation called the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, with limited funding. In China the main task of the “Art Gallery and Art Museum” is to hold art exhibitions. Some major “Art Galleries or Art Museums” and “Art Exhibition Galleries” also house art collections. In China galleries and museums have limited functions compared to similar institutions in the West.²⁶⁸ Under the Party’s political will, the idea of “Art Gallery/Museum” with its main function as an exhibition hall for the Party’s ideological propaganda tool has dominated the concept of a museum in China. My research

art expositions. (See in Cao Yiqiang, “Definition of Art Museum and International Academic Status Quo;” Li Wanwan, *History of Art Museums in China, 1849-1949*). Some major “美术馆” in China such as the Shanghai Art Museum and the National Art Museum of China started to use the term “Art Museum” in their English names from the 1980s. The significance of this change is discussed in this chapter in the context of the changes in art museums in China during this period.

²⁶⁷ Li Wanwan’s recent Chinese publication on the development of “美术馆” in China (1840 to 1949) took the approach that there is no clear distinction between the museum and art museum, nor between the art gallery and art museum. The book’s English title used “art museums” as the translation of “美术馆.” By using these terms interchangeably, Li reflects a progression in changes in art museums in China. (See, Li Wanwan, *History of Art Museums in China, 1849-1949*.) Furthermore, some commentators refer to this idea originating from Japan in the early twentieth century. Commenting on the real significance of the completion of NAMOC’s renovation in 2003 and its plan for building an even larger new premises, Peng Lai and Lu Huan stated: “The change means the Museum will change from being an ‘art exhibition hall,’ an idea that originated in Japan about a century ago. Since the Nationalist Government founded the National Art Exhibition Hall in Nanjing in 1936, the idea of ‘undertaking exhibitions’ had dominated the building and development of Chinese museums for a long time. So the Jiangsu Provincial Museum in Nanjing 南京, founded in 1950s on the basis of National Art Exhibition Hall, and Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery (later the Shanghai Art Museum), founded in 1956, had all acted on such idea.” See Peng Lai and Lu Huan, “China: The Road to ‘Art Museums’,” in at <ArtZineChina.com>, 2006. <new.artzinechina.com/displayprint.php?a=306>, viewed November 12, 2007.

²⁶⁸ In the case of the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) 中国美术馆 in Beijing, research undertaken by the art historian Yu Ding from CAFA, shows the English name as “The Museum of Chinese Art” when it opened in August 1963. (See Yu Ding, “On the Changes of the Development and Management of Chinese Art System since 1949,” p.101.) A recent study by Lin Zao from Guizhou University in China showed that NAMOC was given museum status by the central government to represent the nation’s culture and has been subject to the Party’s political directives from its inception. (See Lin Zao, “National Art Museum of China: Historical Origin, Naming, and Cultural Spirit,” pp.61-62.) From an administrative and management perspective and taking account political reasons, Yu Ding argued the reason why NAMOC could not develop into a fully functioning modern art museum after its establishment was because of its bureaucratic structure. NAMOC sits under the Ministry of Culture, but as “Tuoguan 托管” [trusteeship], managed by the CAA which is part of the government’s cultural propaganda system rather than the cultural relics and museum area within the Ministry of Culture. Having NAMOC under the control of the CAA also means that it is part of the Party’s cultural propaganda system. Therefore, it has “更多的承担了宣传和传播的职能” [“taken on more promotion and dissemination functions”]. (See Yu Ding, “On the Changes of the Development and Management of Chinese Art System since 1949,” p.101.) Translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

found this to be one of the problems in the development of art museums after 1949, and I contend that it started with the ambiguity in the definition of museum and art museum. The definitions established by the National Cultural Relics and Museums Work Conference applied mainly to museums. It was then that The Museum of Chinese Art 中国美术馆, now the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC), adopted those definitions and became the nation's flagship art museum.²⁶⁹

For all the remaining art institutions in China, the term “美术馆” has retained a degree of ambiguity for almost thirty years. It was not until 10 November 1986, one month after the formal celebration of the opening inaugural *Shanghai Art Museum's New Building Completion Exhibition (SAM's New Building Completion Exhibition)* (上海美术馆新馆成立展), that the Ministry of Culture announced an important government documentation called Art Museum Work Provisional Regulations (美术馆工作暂行条例).²⁷⁰ In this official documentation, the definition and functions of an art museum (美术馆) were established for the first time and came into effect on 1 December 1986.²⁷¹ The majority of public art museums in China today arose from art exhibition and collection display galleries during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁷²

The Shanghai Art Museum was at the forefront of this transformation. At the official unveiling of the new museum building on 9 October 1986, the name Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery (SAEG) 上海美术展览馆 was changed to 上海美术馆 with the English name of Shanghai Art Museum (SAM). In the following month, the Ministry of Culture announced the new national regulations that defined the public 美术馆 in China as art museums.²⁷³ The significance of this definition is that it has positioned all public art exhibition galleries in China fully under the government's administrative control and changed the parameter of functions from a museological perspective. More importantly, the new regulations changed the amount of funding allocated to all museums. In SAM's case, the name change meant

²⁶⁹ See footnote 267.

²⁷⁰ It is also accessible online from the official Chinacourt.org website <<https://www.chinacourt.org/law/detail/1986/11/id/5751.shtml>>, viewed 19th August 2017.

²⁷¹ This documentation was recorded in a publication edited by Liu Xilin 刘曦林, an art historian and former director of the Research Department in NAMOC. (See Liu Xilin, ed., 《中国美术年鉴 1949 – 1989》 [*Chinese Art Yearbook 1949-1989*] (Nanning: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 1993). In referencing Liu's records, Lin Zao remarked: “1986 年, 美术馆的博物馆性质被写进国家条例, 这标志着美术馆定位在中国的基本完成 [...]” [“In 1986, Meishuguan as the formal definition of an art museum was written into the national regulations, which marked the completion of the definition of Meishuguan in China.”] (See Lin Zao, “National Art Museum of China: Historical Origin, Naming, and Cultural Spirit,” p.62.) Translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

²⁷² I witnessed this transformation as an artist and during my working experience in SAM during the 1980s.

²⁷³ Liu Xilin, ed., *Chinese Art Yearbook 1949-1989*, 1993-05.

that the funding would be from the city government's administration budget for cultural planning. In the past, the funding for art exhibition galleries was considerably less than that provided for the museums and often inconsistent. Therefore, art exhibition galleries had to generate revenues from their exhibition space and exhibitions. Their collection capacities were limited, mainly reliant on donations and endowments.²⁷⁴

Prior to the name change to SAM, SAEG operated as the exhibition department of the CAA Shanghai Branch since its establishment in August 1956.²⁷⁵ As indicated by its name, the SAEG's essential mandate, under the Party directives for art organisations in China in that period, was to host exhibitions alongside permanent collection displays in line with governmental policies and propaganda. The exhibitions were mostly organised through the various artists associations and other government official channels. The internal structure was similar to that of an exhibition centre or hall. However, the Cultural Revolution interrupted normal operations of all art institutions for ten years. In 1978, two years after the Cultural Revolution ended, the "reform and opening-up" policy promoting economic development and liberalisation swept through all corners of the country, including art institutions. The SAEG went through a period of struggle between the late 1970s to the mid-1980s due to a lack of funding. In an attempt to generate its own revenues, the Gallery rented out its exhibition space to be used for all kinds of exhibitions and, occasionally, even commercial trade fairs.

The change came in 1984. As the "reform and opening-up" policy gained momentum, economic reforms began to reach the cultural organisations in China, including art

²⁷⁴ Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, "中国的美术馆收藏存在着诸多问题" ["Problems of Art Museums' Collections in China"], in *Oriental Art* no.23 (2009): 67.

²⁷⁵ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017). The CAA was established in 1949 within the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles that has been controlled by the Party as one of the "non-governmental" organisations under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Propaganda Department. The "non-governmental" here means it was formed not under the State Council governing structure. Nonetheless, it has been part of the Party's apparatus since its inception. At the municipal city level of Shanghai, there was the Branch of the CAA (from February 1955) which later changed its name to the Shanghai City Artists Association (SCAA) in December 1991. The Shanghai Artists Association was established in 21 April 1954. The name was changed to the CAA Shanghai Branch on 12 February 1955. The name was changed back again to the Shanghai Artists Association in December 1991. (See the Shanghai Federation of Literary and Art Circles website < <http://www.art238.com/renda/2012shwl/introduction/node16113/node16275/index.html>>, viewed 15 April 2018.) Similar to the central government level in Beijing, the administrative structure for the SAEG, was under supervision from the Party's Propaganda Department and the Cultural Bureau of the Shanghai City Government, the Shanghai Federation of Literary and Art Circles and administrated by the SCAA. Its status in the Chinese bureaucratic system is called "半官方" [semi-governmental]. This is because CAA and SCAA had been given the status of "人民团体" [people's organisation] (means not under the governmental structure) in the Chinese bureaucratic system, and SAEG was administratively under SCAA.

institutions and public exhibition spaces.²⁷⁶ Under the more relaxed and open political climate of the early 1980s, the government permitted art exhibition galleries to be reorganised into art museums in an attempt to keep up with the advances in international art museums.²⁷⁷ A number of prominent personalities in the Shanghai city government at the time had influenced the decision making regarding the establishment of SAM.²⁷⁸ The change in bureaucratic structure began with the appointment of a new director for the SAEG. The designated candidate Professor Fang Zengxian 方增先, a well-known brush-and-ink artist and art educator, was instrumental in the transformation of the administrative structure from the SAEG under the Shanghai Artists Association to the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture, and now the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture, Radio, Film & TV (上海文化广播影视管理局).²⁷⁹ Professor Fang first arrived at the Shanghai Chinese Painting Institute (SCPI) (上海中国画院) in 1983 to pursue his artistic career after leaving the Zhejiang Fine Art Academy in Hangzhou.²⁸⁰ Following the retirement of former director Chen Qiucuo 陈秋草 (also a prominent artist) in 1984, the city government appointed Fang as the new director of the SAEG to oversee the implementation of this structural change.²⁸¹ During the first year of his directorship, Fang successfully convinced the city government to change the institution's Chinese name of “上海美术展览馆” [“Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery”] to “上海美术馆” [“Shanghai Art Museum”]. In the Chinese bureaucracy, the change in nomenclature was very important as it also entailed a change in

²⁷⁶ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009, 08 September 2017).

²⁷⁷ *ibid.*

²⁷⁸ Those personalities have been perceived as belonging to the political spectrum of reformist and pragmatic officials in the Shanghai city government at the time. They include Wang Daohan 汪道涵 (Mayor, 1980-85), Xie Lijuan 谢丽娟 (Vice Mayor 1985-96), Ni Tianzeng 倪天增 (Vice Mayor 1983-92), Yang Zhenlong 杨振龙 (Deputy Director of Shanghai Cultural Bureau mid 1980s period), and Lui Meng 吕蒙 (Vice President of the Shanghai Artists Association 1980-96), who had supported the establishment of SAM at various levels and in many ways. For example, from a professional capacity in architecture, Ni Tianzeng had a close supervision of the new building plan and design for SAM in leading to its inaugural opening in 1986. See Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017); Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

²⁷⁹ Fang Zengxian had never joined any political party. (This is confirmed by an email from Fang's son Fang Zihong.)

²⁸⁰ The Shanghai Chinese Painting Institute (SCPI) consisted of selected well-known artists and administratively was under the Shanghai Artists Association at the same level of the administrative structure as the SAEG. (See more information on the Institute at <<http://www.paintingsh.org/showpage.aspx?id=999>>, viewed 21/07/2016). The Zhejiang Fine Art Academy changed its name to the China Academy of Art in 1993. (See in the institution's online website at <<http://xgzx.caa.edu.cn/templates/default/CAA-History-Museum-v3/CAA-HistoryMuseum/index.html#!/III/2>>, viewed 02/02/2017).

²⁸¹ Chen Qiucuo was the director of the SAEG from 1955. Chen was in his 80s and his health had deteriorated when Fang Zengxian took over the directorship in 1984. Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, 2009, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

status. In the case of the Shanghai Art Museum, the new name announced its transformation from semi-governmental to full governmental organisation.²⁸² The change in nomenclature also had a significant impact on the institution's mandate as it went from being a general art exhibition hall to an art museum. More importantly, it also meant that SAM would have the city government's backing in its annual basic operational funding. These major changes represented critical steps for public art museums in Shanghai.

The physical building and appearance of public art museums have been significant aspects in the evolution of modern museums. This concept went through various stages in the modern history of Shanghai. The government under the Nationalist Party of China (Kuomintang)²⁸³ had planned to build an Art Museum in Shanghai in the early twentieth century and was interrupted by wars and political changes. It was not until 1986 that a new building for SAM was constructed on the site of the old SAEG. By the 1980s, the official view of Shanghai had changed significantly. The city was no longer regarded only as "the biggest industrial and commercial city", but "one of the cultural centres" in China that should have a "modernised, fully functioning, and matching international first-class standard" art museum.²⁸⁴ Ni Tianzen 倪天增, the Vice Mayor of Shanghai (1983-92), who was responsible for city management, municipal construction, town and country planning, was directly involved in the design of some major architectural projects including SAM.²⁸⁵ The new building was in a modern "Bauhaus" style that stood out among the old mixed-style architecture in the middle of the famous Nanjing Road (南京路) shopping street, occupying an area of 2200 square metres in the centre of the city. (Figure 41.) It consisted of four floors that had 2480 square metres of exhibition hall space with 5.4 metres ceiling height. The new building significantly increased the exhibition space. The major improvements in the museum building and hardware capacity were the modernised facilities in security,

²⁸² The terms "governmental" and "semi-governmental" in bureaucratic structures both under the Party and the government's control though the funding channels and funding levels are determined by the official ranking.

²⁸³ The Nationalist Party of China (Kuomintang) led by Chiang Kai-shek, was the ruling party in mainland China until 1949.

²⁸⁴ Fang Zengxian, "上海美术馆四十年" ["Forty Years of Shanghai Art Museum"], 《回顾展望 1956-1996: 上海美术馆四十周年纪念》 [*Review and Outlook 1956-1996: In Celebration of the Forty-Years Anniversary*] ed. Ma Chuhua (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1997), p.15.

²⁸⁵ Ni Tianzen 倪天增 graduated from the Department of Architecture in Qinghua University in 1962. Working as an architect in Shanghai after his graduation, Ni held a number of important professional posts in government institutions such as the director of the Shanghai Industrial Architecture Design Institute (上海工业建筑设计院), the assistant director of the Bureau of Shanghai City Planning, Architecture Management (上海城市规划建筑管理局), before he was elected to Vice Mayor in Shanghai in 1983. See in the Shanghai government's *Office of Shanghai Chronicles* website at <<http://www.shtong.gov.cn/newsite/node2/node2245/node4482/node54728/node60565/node60567/userobject1ai49077.html>>, viewed 17 April 2018.

fireproofing, humidity, and temperature control systems, which were regarded as advanced in museum architecture in China at the time.²⁸⁶



Figure 41. The new Shanghai Art Museum – 1986.

The main entrance facing the street on the east corner jutted out from the top but was recessed on the lower part of the building, symbolising the prow of an advancing large ship. On the façade, the name of SAM 上海美术馆 in Chinese calligraphy style was designed with the characters assembled from the handwriting of Lu Xun 鲁迅, one of China's leading twentieth-century writers and cultural critics who spent most of his career in Shanghai in the late 1920s and 1930s.²⁸⁷ He was famous for his criticisms of political, social, and cultural

²⁸⁶ Under the “reform and opening-up” policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the new SAM building (1986) and its facilities quickly became outdated by the rapid progress of technologies and was unable to accommodate the growing demand for exhibitions and requirements for new technological facilities for various exhibitions. In 2000, SAM relocated into the renovated 1930s Shanghai Race Club building across the road. This time, the floor space of the new location reached 17,326 square metres. The Museum comprised 12 exhibition halls, with more than 5,800 square metres instead of 2,480 square metres of the total exhibiting area in the previous building. The updated technologies and facilities were capable of hosting various kinds of art exhibitions and relevant conferences and activities. See in Fang Zengxian, “Forty Years of Shanghai Art Museum,” p.15; Shanghai Art Museum, *Annual Report of Shanghai Art Museum 2006* (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2009), p.9.

²⁸⁷ Lu Xun is the founding figure of modern Chinese literature, an activist at the forefront of many political, social and cultural movements such as the “New Culture Movement”, “May Fourth Movement” and the “League of Left-Wing Writers” in Shanghai during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His liberal ideas and advocacy of modernity in China through his writings have influenced generations throughout the country. He lived in Shanghai in the late 1920s and 1930s until his death in 1936. There is a large volume of literature on Lu Xun available both inside and outside of China. The Lu Xun Museums in Shanghai and Beijing provide comprehensive information and material collections on Lu Xun's life and his contributions to modern Chinese literature, as well as conducting extensive research programmes. (See the museums' website at <<http://www.luxunmuseum.com>>; <<http://www.luxunmuseum.com.cn/index.html>>).

conditions in the early part of twentieth century.²⁸⁸ In 1931, he established the “Woodcut Technique Workshop” (木刻讲习会) and initiated the “Creative Print Movement” (新兴版画运动), which had a profound influence on realist art in China throughout the twentieth century.²⁸⁹ The use of Lu Xun’s calligraphy was, therefore, significant. In keeping with the “reform” rhetoric, this new modern-style architecture with a calligraphy style of the icon of modernist ideas in China signified a new phase for art and art museums in Shanghai. It was a manifestation of the modern spirit being reinvigorated at a very high level.

At the completion of the new building in 1986, SAM was launched with a new identity and mandate as “a state-owned art institution that collects and exhibits all kinds of works of art and undertakes cultural exchange between China and foreign countries.”²⁹⁰ In a review of the art museum’s first year of operation, Fang claimed that “there is a difference between an art museum and a museum. Its [an art museum’s] main social function is to display this century’s art trends.”²⁹¹ Under Fang’s leadership, SAM embarked on an exciting yet politically challenging task of engaging with the avant-garde art activity within its exhibition programmes. The inaugural exhibition in October 1986 was an example of this significant move as part of the Museum’s programmes.²⁹² Facing the political and economic development in the mid-1980s, SAM stood in stark contrast to other state-owned art museums in China, including NAMOC in Beijing and the Jiangsu Provincial Art Museum²⁹³ in Nanjing, which were still distancing themselves from avant-garde art because of the political sensitivities.²⁹⁴ It was then that SAM formulated a clear direction and positioned itself with

²⁸⁸ Gloria Davies, *Lu Xun's Revolution: Writing in a Time of Violence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

²⁸⁹ Uchiyama Kakichi and Nara Kazuo, *Lu Xun yu Muke* [Lu Xun and Woodcut] trans. Han Zongqi (Beijing: People’s Fine Art Publishing House, 1985). (In Chinese)

²⁹⁰ See Xu Hong and Zhang Lian, eds. “Introduction of the Art Museum” in *Fine Arts of the Century: Year Book of Shanghai State Art Museum 1986.10 – 1987.12* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1988), p.2. Title translation by Lanshang Zhang and David Kelly.

²⁹¹ Fang Zengxian, “Foreword”, in *Fine Arts of the Century: Year Book of Shanghai State Art Museum 1986.10 – 1987.12* eds. Xu Hong and Zhang Lian (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1987), p.1. Title translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

²⁹² In my interview with Zhang Jianjun who was one of the key organisers for this exhibition, Jianjun recalled that there was no publicity during the inauguration of the new Museum’s building because the government officials were not pleased with the prominent position of contemporary art in *SAM’s New Building Completion Exhibition*. The local media was instructed not to report this event. (Zhang Jianjun, Interview with Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 2004, 2008.) A lengthy discussion on the exhibition is in the following text under the heading of *SAM’s New Building Completion Exhibition*.

²⁹³ The first state-level art museum in China was called the National Art Exhibition Hall was founded in 1936 in Nanjing during the so-called ‘Nanjing decade’ (1927- 1937) in the Republic of China. The name was changed to the Jiangsu Provincial Art Museum(江苏省美术馆) in 1960.

²⁹⁴ There is a large volume of writings in China on NAMOC and the Jiangsu Provincial Art Museum after the Cultural Revolution. The scope of this thesis limits further examination of those major art museums.

its exhibition programmes, collections, and research direction starting from nineteenth-century Chinese modern art up to contemporary art.²⁹⁵

Initiatives of Individuals in the 1980s

It may be said that the transformation of SAEG into SAM resulted from the “reform” policy in the early 1980s. However, the investigation in this chapter is on the individuals who worked as artists and art administrators within those art institutions, and how they contributed to this transformation despite a restrictive political and bureaucratic system. Drawing on the evidence from my research, I argue that the significant changes would not have been made and successfully implemented without the leadership of a visionary personality during and after the transformation of SAM. In the first half of the 1980s, China lacked the experience and the theoretical framework for building a modern art museum. Without any model to follow, the Museum’s management team had to invent and develop a new type of Chinese art museum. In an essay written a decade later, Director Fang articulates his concept of “feeling our way from the outset” (从头摸索) to create programmes and policies for a new type of professional Chinese art museum.²⁹⁶ This situation also opened the possibility for negotiations between the government’s political agendas and the institution’s priorities. As the new director, Fang took this rare opportunity to consult with art professionals, key government bureaucrats and Party officials regarding the new mandate of this institution.²⁹⁷

The transformation of SAEG into SAM took place against a dramatic political background. The “reform and opening-up” policy posed some serious questions, both ideologically and socially, which the conservative faction within the Party viewed as a threat and this prompted them to wage a political campaign, the so-called “Anti-Spiritual Pollutions” (反对精神污染) to curb Western-inspired liberal ideas.²⁹⁸ Following the launch of this new campaign, many artists and art events were publicly criticised and deemed to be affected by bourgeois “spiritual pollutions.” Those criticised included the artists Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan as well as the art events in which they participated.²⁹⁹ The campaign was not popular as the chilling memory of the Cultural Revolution remained fresh for many in

²⁹⁵ Fang Zengxian, “Forty Years of Shanghai Art Museum,” p.16.

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p.15.

²⁹⁷ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009, 08 September 2017).

²⁹⁸ See an in-depth discussion related to the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in Chapter 1 under the subheading “National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s” on page 19 and in Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, pp.233-237.

²⁹⁹ See further discussions in Chapter 1, Chapter 3 on Zhang Jianjun, and Chapter 4 on Li Shan.

China. It started in October 1983 and faded into obscurity by 1984. Nevertheless, it did temporarily slow down the progress of the reform. As a result of this political campaign, the desire and advocacy for political democracy and freedom of artistic expression became stronger. The introspective critiques and idealistic outlooks in the political cultural discourse of the late 1970s and early 1980s regained momentum in searching for new ideas from the West. The period after the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was described by many art critics as the '85 Movement.³⁰⁰ The radical changes in artistic productions and in aesthetic discourse were resonant with the earlier political cultural discourse but turned to a deconstructive mode. The contemporary art activities had reached a new level.³⁰¹

Under Fang's leadership, SAM underwent a professionalisation of internal structural reforms. Drawing on the role Shanghai had played in modern history, Fang envisioned a leading role for SAM among similar art institutions in the surrounding Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces.³⁰² Until the end of the 1970s, all art exhibitions in China were organised by the various artists' associations and relevant government agencies. Independently organised art exhibitions by art museums were almost non-existent, although there were some early examples of artist-organised exhibitions.³⁰³ Since SAM's curatorial function was a priority, a research department (研究部) similar to the curatorial department in international art museums was soon created to engage with art discourses not only on traditional art but, more importantly, on contemporary art. In recognising the vibrant contemporary art transformations at the time and seeing many young artists producing experimental works that pushed boundaries, Fang appointed a resourceful artist Chen Long 陈龙 as the deputy director of SAM,³⁰⁴ and an active young experimental artist Zhang Jianjun as the director's assistant and head of the research department. The research department was made up of young artists and art critics such as Hu Zhirong 胡志荣 and Xu Hong 徐虹, who were later joined by Li Xu 李旭, and others. In Fang's view, having a research department made up of theorists and artists would maintain a close link with the art community locally

³⁰⁰ The definition of the "85 Movement" has been discussed in Chapter 1.

³⁰¹ See discussions on some key texts in the '85 movement in Chapter 1 under the heading "*National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art in the 1980s*".

³⁰² Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

³⁰³ Two of the most significant artist-organised exhibitions, the *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* and the *Stars* exhibition, had broken the totalitarian mode in 1979. See the in-depth discussions of these two exhibitions in Chapter 1.

³⁰⁴ Chen Long 陈龙 is a well-known Shanghai artist. He worked in the traditional Chinese ink paintings with the modern style of Western art techniques in pushing the boundary of its traditional art form during the 1970s and 1980s.

and nationally as well as internationally in keeping touch with the changes in contemporary art.³⁰⁵

Building the SAM's art collections was an important agenda item. While still functioning as an exhibition gallery, the SAEG established a unit to manage the artworks donated by local artists or bequeathed by artists' families.³⁰⁶ In the new museum structure, Fang reorganised the collection department from the existing old unit, but its management required substantial financial support. Drawing on the historical significance of Shanghai as the arts centre in China in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Fang proposed a collection plan for SAM with an annual budget submitted to the City Government in the early years of his directorship.³⁰⁷ Although financial support from the city government did not fully meet the collection plan, it helped to kick-start the collection programme from 1984. The collection focused mainly on nineteenth-century Shanghai School Paintings in brush and ink with colour. The Museum's executive director (1993-2005) Li Xiangyang 李向阳 recalled that there were about 2000 pieces in the collection when he joined SAM in 1993.³⁰⁸ In 1996, the Museum had over 3,200 items in its collection and by 2006, the collection had increased to 6,444 items.³⁰⁹ Despite Fang's disappointment over the shortfall of the budget to support SAM's collection programmes in the beginning, the Museum was able to build its collections by accepting artist's gifts, donations and endowments throughout the 1980s.³¹⁰ Since the 1990s, private individual collectors and

³⁰⁵ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

³⁰⁶ The previous SAEG also had a shopfront that could sell artworks of traditional Chinese paintings and calligraphy as well as arts and crafts items. After 1949 the art market was shut down and there were no private commercial art galleries and specialised art shops selling art. Artworks could only be sold at the designated museum art exhibition gallery shops, and the state-run art shops such as the Friendship Stores 友谊商店, the Rongbaozhai 荣宝斋 Art Shop in Beijing, and the Duoyunxuan 朵云轩 Art Shop in Shanghai. According to Zhang Jianjun, who had worked in the old collection unit, there was no registration of items held in the SAEG's collection before its transformation to SAM. (See Guo Wen, (Interview) "张健君：那些年我们经历过的上海美术馆 – 别了，上海美术馆" ["Zhang Jianjun: Our past experiences at the Shanghai Art Museum – Farewell, Shanghai Art Museum"], at artron.net, December 31, 2012).

<<https://news.artron.net/20121231/n295738.html>>, viewed 6 November 2017.

³⁰⁷ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

³⁰⁸ See Peng Lai and Lu Huan, "China: The Road to 'Art Museums'" in *ArtZineChina.com* (2006).

<new.artzinechina.com/display_print.php?a=306>, viewed November 12, 2007.

³⁰⁹ See Ma Chuhua, ed., *Review and Outlook 1956-1996: In Celebration of the Forty-Years Anniversary*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1997), p.31; *Annual Report of Shanghai Art Museum 2006* (Shanghai: Shanghai Book Store Publishing House, 2009), p.18. The report counts 8,692 pieces in the collection. There is a difference between the use of the terms "item" and "piece." An item could include multiple objects and often is registered for sculptures or installation art, while a "piece" is registered as only a single object.

³¹⁰ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

private art museums have taken over in collecting historically significant artworks. The rapid development of the Chinese art market with Chinese local art collectors and private art museums emerging during the last two decades has opened another page on collecting Chinese modern and contemporary art and preserving the history of visual art.³¹¹

Under Fang's leadership and with the new management team, SAM responded to the local art scene. Prior to the inaugural exhibition, SAM hosted the *First Shanghai Youth Art Exhibition* (April 1986) organised by local art organisations. It was a large exhibition at the temporary premises before moving into the new building with over two hundred exhibits mainly from local young artists. Fang was actively involved in organising and preparing this exhibition and participated in the selection panel for the exhibits, which represented recent explorations of young artists in various styles.³¹² The exhibition was reported in major media including the influential national art magazines and journals such as *Meishu*, *China Art Newspaper*, and *Jiangsu Pictorial Journal* (江苏画刊) in which Fang contributed an article encouraging the spirit of exploration among young artists.³¹³ The art critic Gao Minglu described the exhibition as a large "group presentation" of young artists' works and noted that it "no doubt has a big influence in Shanghai."³¹⁴

As a state-owned art institution, SAM's exhibition halls generally gave priority to the official art exhibition programmes of the city and central government. To ensure engagement with contemporary art, SAM not only encouraged discussions and debates but

³¹¹ The recently established Long Museum in Shanghai is an important example of the scale in private collecting. See discussion on the Long Museum in the Introduction of this thesis.

³¹² Gao Minglu, et al. *'85 Movement*, pp.210-212.

³¹³ *ibid.*, 212.

³¹⁴ *ibid.*, 211. The major art journal *Meishu* reported this *First Shanghai Youth Art Exhibition* that included Zhang Jianjun and Gu Wenda's works. [See in *Meishu* 美术, 7 (1986): 2, 38-39, 40-42, 59] The organisers of this exhibition were key active young artists in the local art scene such as Yu Xiaofu 俞晓夫, Zhou Changjiang, Zhang Jianjun, Hu Zhirong 胡志荣, Sun Liang 孙良, Liu Yaping 刘亚平, Zhou Gang 周刚, Zhou Jun 周俊, and Shen Haopeng 沈浩鹏. Unlike the exhibitions organized through the Shanghai Artists Association (SAA), the primary criterion was that participants must be members of SAA. This exhibition did not require SAA membership. There were overwhelming submissions from local young artists (under 40 years old) in numbers exceeding one thousand two hundred. The final selection comprised over two hundred exhibits including oil painting, sculpture, Chinese ink painting, and Lianhuanhua 连环画 (picture-story book) mainly in the modern style. The exhibition opened on 19 April 1986. After the exhibition, the Shanghai Youth Artists' Association was formed by those activists in this exhibition organising group. (Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, 10 August 2018). See also: "The Inaugural Shanghai Youth Fine Art Grand Exhibition Opening, 19 April 1986" ("1986 年 4 月 19 日首届上海青年美术大展开幕"), at < <http://www.kankanews.com/a/2012-02-21/0011013214.shtml>>, viewed 10/08/2017; Lu Huan, "从美术赤帜到艺术品牌 – 析上海青年美展年之路" ["From red flag of fine arts to artistic brand: exploring 30 years history of Shanghai Youth Art Exhibitions"], 《大时代之光: 上海青年美展 30 年回顾展》 [The Light of the Great Era: Retrospective Exhibition of Thirty Years Shanghai Youth Art Exhibition] (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2008).

also allocated about 300 square metres of gallery space on the fourth floor for showing experimental works by emerging young artists. Zhang Jianjun, one of the leading young avant-garde artists at that time, was responsible for the exhibition programmes and activities in this space. From 1987 to 1988, exhibitions by local and international artists were often accompanied by seminars. Some of these exhibitions included the solo experimental art exhibitions of Yuan Shun 袁顺, Li Liang 李梁, Ding Bin 丁斌 and Zhang Jianjun; the *Shengsi Fisherman Paintings Exhibition* (1987) (嵊泗渔民画展) with one hundred paintings, which was an experimental collaborative project between the artist Li Feixue 李飞雪 and fishermen in a remote fishing village on Shengsi Island 嵊泗岛 in Zhejiang 浙江 province; and a group exhibition called *Contemporary Art from New York* with 41 artworks of an experimental nature and organised by New York artist and curator Stephen Lane. It was exhibited at the Beijing Painting Institute (北京画院) and SAM in 1987. There was also a scheduled exchange group exhibition with both New York artists and Chinese artists at the Snug Harbor Cultural Centre in Staten Island, New York in 1988. This exhibition was the result of individual initiatives of the curator and the artists working on a low budget. It demonstrated that the cultural exchange between China and the West in the late 1980s began at the grass-roots level of artistic communities and that SAM played a crucial role in the international cultural exchange at that level.³¹⁵

While individual artists were making their contributions, the professional staff of the SAM worked coherently towards achieving long-term goals. In the early days, the professional staff consisted mostly of artists. For example, Xu Hong, a young art graduate from the Shanghai Normal University Fine Art Department, joined SAM in 1985 as a member of the research department working on the Museum's journal titled "Shanghai Art Museum" as well as the annual report.³¹⁶ Trained as a practicing artist, Xu was actively participating in local avant-garde art activities during the mid-1980s.³¹⁷ Li Xu, a young graduate with a major in Art Theory from the CAFA, was an exception. Although not a practicing artist, he was brought in to strengthen the research department in 1988. He worked closely with

³¹⁵ See Stephen Lane, *22 American Artists Works on Paper* (New York: Coyote Press, 1987).

³¹⁶ Xu Hong was responsible for the first Museum's annual report that was published in early 1988. The sixteen-page annual report was in an art exhibition catalogue style with eleven pages of selected images of artworks from the Museum's collections, the past year's exhibitions, and symposiums. A spread page of the exhibitions list reflected the variety of the exhibition programme from October 1986 to December 1987. With the title "美术世纪: 上海美术馆年鉴 1986.10 – 1987.12" ["Fine Arts of the Century: Year Book of Shanghai State Art Museum 1986.10 – 1987.12"], it primarily acted as the Museum's introduction to the public. Simple as it was, it contained the preliminary professional information about the newly established art museum.

³¹⁷ Nicholas Jose, "Towards The World: China's New Art 1989-93," in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, exh cat, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), p.XXXVIII; Gao Minglu, *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources* Vol.2 (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), p.239.

colleagues in the research department as well as those from different sections of SAM and was actively involved in liaising with writers and the media for the museum's seminars and forums. In a special edition of the *Shanghai Art Museum* journal with a focus on "nudity in oil paintings" (油画人体艺术) and published in April 1989, both Xu and Li contributed their articles together with other articles by artists and art critics from Shanghai and Beijing.³¹⁸ With the Museum's emphasis on research under Fang's leadership, both Xu Hong and Li Xu followed their interests and specialised in feminist art and abstract art in China respectively and have made important contributions to the contemporary Chinese art discourse.³¹⁹

The case study of SAM in this thesis illustrates the process of art museum development in the 1980s under restrictive political and social conditions. Among the immediate tasks that SAM undertook were the new curatorial direction and exhibitions, which I will discuss in the next section. Many museum functions, such as the collecting policy, public education programmes, publications, international art institutional links, and staff professional training, were at a preliminary planning stage in the 1980s. For example, the conservation unit was still limited to dealing with traditional Chinese ink paintings in the 1980s. To upgrade SAM's conservation function and capabilities was no simple matter and required financial backup and a long-term plan. Unlike its sister institution, the Shanghai Museum, which had been able to build its international network independently over the years, neither SAM nor its predecessor had been able to work directly with international art institutions. Under listed exhibitions in SAM's first year annual report, only eight out of a total of 63 exhibitions were international exhibitions from October 1986 to December 1987.³²⁰ Those international exhibitions were from the state official cultural exchange programmes.

³¹⁸ This special edition journal engaged in the current discourse on nudity in art. Discussing and showing nudity in art in public had been prohibited under the CCP since the 1950s. The discussion was triggered by the exhibition of "中国首次人体油画大展" [China First Human Body Oil Painting Grand Exhibition] organised by a group of art lecturers from the CAFA. The exhibition consisted of 136 nude oil paintings and was shown in NAMOC in December 1988 and in the Shanghai Art Museum in February 1989. It drew over 220,000 visitors during the eighteen days of the exhibition in Beijing and 200,000 visitors during twenty-five days of the exhibition in Shanghai.

³¹⁹ For examples of their contributions, see Xu Hong, 《女性：美术之思》 [*Female: Art Thoughts*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2003); Li Xu, "Abstraction: An Old Topic," in *Metaphysics 2001: Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition*, exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 2001). Title translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. I have known Zhang Jianjun and Xu Hong personally within the local artistic community and was in frequent contact with them before I joined SAM in 1987.

³²⁰ Xu Hong and Zhang Lian 张连, ed., *Fine Arts of the Century: Year Book of Shanghai State Art Museum 1986.10 – 1987.12*, pp.4-5. Those eight international exhibitions were: *Shanghai Osaka Seal and Calligraphy Exhibition* (November 1986), *Images of Modern People in Soviet Plastic Art Exhibition* (December 1986), *Australian Youth Art from Armidale Region* (March 1987), *The Port Enterprise, City of Antwerp, Belgium* (September 1987), *Images of British urban and rural Exhibition* (October 1987), *Modern Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition* (November 1987), *Contemporary Art from New York Exhibition* (December 1987), *Shanghai-Osaka the Zeitgeist Photography Exhibition* (December 1987).



Figure 42. The catalogue of *L'Exposition des peintures chinoises de Shanghai* exhibition shown in Europe in 1988.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that while under the central government's restrictions on international art exhibitions, SAM still managed to explore the possibility of hosting small international art exhibitions outside official channels. For example, the *22 American Artists' Works on Paper* exhibition from the United States was staged in December 1987 on the museum's fourth floor experimental art exhibition space with 41 works. It drew large numbers of visitors from the local contemporary art community. In 1984, as the incoming director, Fang visited Japan as part of a cultural delegation from Shanghai. It was at the time Japan was the economic development model for China under the "reform and opening-up" policy.³²¹ As the central government's control relaxed towards the late 1980s, Fang took the first Shanghai Art Museum curated exhibition of Chinese modern paintings titled *The Chinese Paintings* to France and Italy in September and October 1988.³²² (Figure 42.) The exhibition consisted of 67 modern and contemporary ink paintings from 48 artists that were selected by the Museum's curatorial team including Chen Long the deputy director and

³²¹ I remember a popular public radio programme in Shanghai for teaching the Japanese language after the established diplomatic relations in 1972 and its popularity continued into the 1980s. At this time in Shanghai, Japanese was more popular than learning English.

³²² As the Museum's first international outbound exhibition, it had the official permission and approval of the city. Fang, accompanied by the former party secretary of the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery Zhang Yunping, 张云聘 took the exhibition to the Rhone-Alpes region and to Marseille and Milan. My research to this point has not identified the host organisations in France and Italy. Wang Zheng 王正, a Museum colleague from the curatorial team was responsible for compiling the artworks and producing an exhibition catalogue. The 16-page soft-cover catalogue was produced only in French and included Director Fang's Foreword and a list of exhibits plus a brief introduction on the artists without images of the exhibits. [Chen Long and Wang Zheng, interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 07 December 2017).]

Wang Zhen 王正 from the research department.³²³ Fang subsequently led a cultural delegation to Shanghai's sister city of Osaka in Japan in 1990. During those overseas trips, Fang visited many world-renowned art museums and galleries and met with international art professionals, as well as seeing great international art from classical to contemporary from the collections of the art institutions he visited.³²⁴

The international exhibitions that SAM held during its first year were evidence of the Museum's sense of mission and ambition to achieve international standards. All these initial endeavours contributed to vigorous international exchanges that culminated in the Shanghai Biennale exhibition programme in the following decade. During the celebration of SAM's fortieth anniversary in 1996, Director Fang reiterated SAM's mission and goal.

As 2000 approaches, SAM gives thought to its historical position and social role in the new century. Our goal is to make SAM a truly influential and professional art museum domestically and internationally, with a fully functional advanced facility and first-class talents [of our staff].

This grand construction will combine the ideals of generations of museum professionals with the expectations of Shanghai citizens and artists over many years. The '96 Shanghai (Fine Art) Biennale held in March to April 1996 may be called the key to achieving this goal.³²⁵

In exploring Fang's contributions, I am not only examining his managerial role at SAM but also discussing his personal artistic achievements which bore the hallmarks of early twentieth-century modernist art in China.³²⁶ A primary factor in Fang's many successes has been his liberal and open-minded approach to new ideas. During an interview with the author, Fang frequently used the phrase "learning-to-understand" — a fitting example of his

323 Wang Zheng, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai December 10, 2017).

324 Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

325 See Fang Zengxian, "Forty Years of the Shanghai Art Museum," (上海美术馆四十年)," *Review and Outlook 1956-1996: In Celebration of the Forty-Years Anniversary* (回顾展望 1956-1996:上海美术馆建馆四十周年纪) ed. Ma, Chuhua. (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1997), p.18. Translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. 1996 marked ten-years since the transformation of SAM from the SAEG and recorded the significant step of the first Shanghai Biennale exhibition that took place in that year.

³²⁶ See the influence of some key figures of early twentieth-century modernists in China from his early artistic career in Hu Jianjun 胡建君 and Tang Zheming 汤哲明, 《方增先 – 泼墨真情画人生》 [Fang Zengxian: *Splashing Ink to Express Feeling of Life*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Jinxiu Literary Publishing House, 2009), pp.32-35. This publication was produced by the Shanghai Federation Literary and Art Circles as part of a series of monographs of renowned public figures in the art and culture of Shanghai. See the quotation of Fang's developing thoughts in Fang Zengxian, "Preface," in *Shanghai Biennale 2000* exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000), p.V.

broad-minded attitude towards different ideas or art forms. Fang approached his role as SAM's director with the same tolerant attitude, advocating a new model for art museums in China "starting from scratch and experimenting and exploring."³²⁷ This was reflected in his managerial style and his vision for SAM. The link between Fang's work as a museum director and his own artistic journey is also demonstrated throughout his professional career as an art educator at the CAA and in managerial roles with the SCPI as well as at SAM.³²⁸

Fang's early art training was in the Western-style oil painting. He was a member of the first cohort of students admitted to the National Art College in Hangzhou (today the China National Art Academy) after the regime change in 1949. This institution was famous for its modern art education led by one of the key figures in art education in twentieth-century China, Lin Fengmian 林风眠, and his like-minded colleagues. They were all teaching at the College at the time.³²⁹ Fang studied under those inspiring teachers for four years. Following his graduation, Fang was given a teaching job at the newly established Colour Ink Painting Department (彩墨画系) within the College, and later he became an accomplished art educator and Chinese ink painter.³³⁰ The critical artistic breakthrough in Fang's figurative ink painting was combining the Western drawing techniques and traditional Chinese painting's expressive line work techniques known as emotional expressions (写意) style from the "Flower and Bird Painting" (花鸟画) in the mid 1950s. For example, the painting titled "Hard-gathered Grains" ("粒粒皆辛苦") that Fang painted in 1955 depicts a middle-aged farmer who is picking up the grains dropped on the road by mule trailers transporting rice.

³²⁷ Fang Zengxian, "Forty Years of the Shanghai Art Museum," p.15.

³²⁸ Prior to his appointment to the directorship of SAM (1985), Fang was invited to join the SCPI (1983) from CAA where he was a key academic member of the institution (1954-1982). He was appointed as the deputy director of the SCPI soon after his arrival in 1984. Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

³²⁹ China National Art Academy was founded by the renowned educator Cai Yuanpei in 1928. To evaluate and understand adequately the significance and the difficulties in Fang's artistic pursuits in the 1980s, and how the development of his thinking process helped to form the world view that influenced his work as an art administrator at SAM, it is necessary to explore further Fang's early artistic achievements. He studied oil painting at the East China Campus of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou 杭州 (the institution's name was changed to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1958, and is now the China Academy of Art) in 1949. He graduated with a post-graduate qualification and then worked at the newly established Chinese Painting Department in that School in 1955. His artistic achievements in the 1950s to 1960s he was regarded as part of the "New Zhe School of Figurative Painting" (新浙派人物画). The seminal figures of the Haipai 海派 (Shanghai School) paintings Ren Bonian 任伯年, Wu Changshuo 吴昌硕 and his followers Wang Geyi 王个簃 and Pan Tianshou 潘天寿 influenced Fang's early artistic career in the traditional Chinese figurative ink painting. Pan was a teacher at the East China Campus of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (currently the China Art Academy) in Hangzhou when Fang first began attending that Academy in the early 1950s. (See Hu Jianjun, Tang Zheming, *Fang Zengxian: Splashing Ink to Express Feeling of Life*, pp.37-39.)

³³⁰ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017). Also see Hu Jianjun and Tang Zheming, *Fang Zengxian: Splashing Ink to Express Feeling of Life*, pp.28-43.

(Figure 43.) The painting draws the viewer's focus to the farmer's hand reaching out to pick up the grains on the road with the mule trailers in the distance. The visual message was simple and direct. It captured the public's sympathy for peasant farmers toiling away on their farms to produce wheat or rice and was well suited to the political climate of the 1950s.³³¹ The painting first appeared in a large format poster and was published by the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House in the middle of the 1950s, and later reproduced in many magazines and journals.³³²



Figure 43. Fang Zengxian, *Hard-gathered Grains* 《粒粒皆辛苦》, 1955.
Ink on rice paper, 99 x 56 cm.

As a practicing artist Fang had a deep understanding of the issues in the art community. The traditional Chinese ink painting faced the same challenges from the development of contemporary art as other forms of art in China in the late 1970s and 1980s. A public letter by Jiang Feng 江丰, published in *Fine Art* magazine in November 1979, encapsulated the

³³¹ In a telephone interview with Zhu Liang 朱亮 from the National Art Museum of China, Fang recalled that *The People's Daily* in Beijing published a major essay in March 1955 titled “人人都要节约粮食” [“Everybody Needs to Economize on Food”] as part of campaign for saving food in China. This inspired him to create a painting along this topic. See in “Fang Zengxian and ‘Hard Work in Every Grain’”, *The Journal of National Art Museum of China*, December edition, 2006. (Also see online from NAMOC's website: <http://www.namoc.org/cbjy/cbw/qks/qk2006_2557/qk200612/201303/t20130319_177174.htm>

³³² Fang's later paintings 《说红书》 [Conversing about the Red Book] produced in 1964 and 《艳阳天》 [Bright Sunny Sky] produced in 1975 also achieved great success. The translations of the artwork titles are provided by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

national debate on traditional Chinese ink painting.³³³ The aim of the letter was to rebut some criticisms from the conservatives who objected to adopting ideas and styles from Western modern art and incorporating them into traditional Chinese ink painting. The key concerns and discussions in the debate revolved around how to make this traditional art form relevant to and reflective of contemporary life, and at the same time preserving the national tradition. The debate on traditional Chinese painting reached boiling point with Li Xiaoshan's 李小山 article "My views on contemporary Chinese ink painting" ("当代中国画之我见"). First published in *Jiangsu Pictorial Journal* in 1985, it proclaimed the doomsday of the traditional Chinese painting and urged artists to break away from the worship of old traditional theories and art forms and instead to pay attention to modern art theories and ideas.³³⁴ As a recognised artist in the Chinese figurative ink painting, Fang maintained a firm belief in the importance of introducing Western style art practices and ideas into traditional ink painting and broadening artistic languages by engaging with the contemporary art scene.³³⁵ Although Fang did not enter the debates during this period, he used his influence in the workplace and in his own artistic practice to reach out to fellow artists.

The continuous search for new vocabularies in his painting and the struggle to transcend his previous artistic achievement represented the critical goals and challenges in Fang's art practice in the 1980s. His visit to Qinghai 青海 was a good example. When Fang joined the SCPI in 1983, he had the opportunity to go to the region of the Qinghai - Tibet Plateau (青藏高原) for two months to give lectures on figurative ink painting. During this trip, the experience of interacting with Tibetans and learning about the local culture inspired him to experiment with a fresh new way of expressing his feelings and representing the human figures by employing Tibetan images.³³⁶ Upon his return to Shanghai, Fang started to experiment with layers of dry ink to represent the richness and depth of the characters of the people in his paintings, a technique called *Jimo* 积墨 which Fang borrowed from

³³³ See footnote 234 in this chapter.

³³⁴ Li Xiaoshan 李小山, "My View on the Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting" ["当代中国画之我见"], in *Jiangsu Pictorial Journal* no.7 (1985); Li Xiaoshan, "The doomsday of the (Traditional) Chinese painting," (中国画已到了穷途末日的时候) *Fine Arts in China*, 26 October (1985).

³³⁵ Jiang Mei 江梅, "历史, 时代与个人 – 水墨大家方增先的艺术人生" ["History, Time and Personal: Ink Master Fang Zengxian's Artistic Life"], in exh cat. 《跋涉者 – 方增先艺术回顾展》 [*The Trekker – A Retrospective of Fang Zengxian's Art*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 2007). This article is also accessible online at <<http://news.artxun.com/fangzengxian-1588-7938911.shtml>>. Translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

³³⁶ It was a common practice at the time for artists to travel to remote regions in search of the exotic, a practice that fulfilled the larger CCP strategic goal of impressing upon people that Tibet was an indivisible part of the PRC.



Figure 44. Fang Zengxian, *Laughter in the Tent* 《帐篷里的笑声》, 1984.
Ink on rice paper, 120 x 130 cm.

traditional landscape ink painting.³³⁷ (Figure 44.) Fang was the first artist to employ this technique to create a new genre in the field of Chinese ink paintings.³³⁸

Fang's thoughts on the direction of his own art were stimulated by the contemporary art emerging in Shanghai during the 1980s from his personal contact with young avant-garde artists. Fang was able to have frequent discussions on the trends and ideas of the avant-garde art with emerging artists such as Zhang Jianjun and Chen Zhen.³³⁹ This "learning process" enabled him to be in dialogue with the contemporary art, which appeared to him as often highly individualistic in artistic expression and style and carried an "impact" (Chongjili 冲击力), as he put it, visually and emotionally.³⁴⁰ He began to experiment in creating a similar "impact" in figurative ink painting and produced a group of works in a style that combines the concepts of ink painting, calligraphy, and design. Fang's art in the 1980s and his experimentations with the expressive *Jimo* technique as well as a strong sense of

³³⁷ The *Jimo* 积墨 technique is a traditional Chinese landscape ink painting technique that is to apply layers of ink in various brush strokes on to the image to achieve effects of visual depth and richness.

³³⁸ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017); Hu Jianjun and Tang Zheming, *Fang Zengxian: Splashing Ink to Express Feeling of Life*, pp.117-121. This publication was produced by the Shanghai Federation of Literary and Art Circles as part of a series of monographs of renowned public figures in the art and culture of Shanghai.

³³⁹ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

³⁴⁰ Hu Jianjun and Tang Zheming, *Fang Zengxian: Splashing Ink to Express Feeling of Life*, p.7.

form may be traceable to Western influences. His art journey reflected a specific period and social environment in the development of traditional figurative ink painting.³⁴¹

His art exerted a significant impact on the discourse of Chinese traditional figurative ink painting in the second half of the 20th century. From today's perception, the content of Fang's early works comprised largely of official propaganda. However, his significant artistic achievement in figurative ink painting was undeniable. Jiang Mei 江梅, SAM's curator, once described Fang's early work as the "classic" art of that special era, suggesting that it contains "a wealth of values and significances in art, history, politics, and society."³⁴² It reflects a particular condition of life many artists lived under the Party's rule in the 1950s and 1960s when art was a tool to promote Party ideology and policies, and when individual artists must direct personal emotions and creative energy towards Party's directives. According to Jiang Mei, the images in Fang's art are "symbolic models for people today as ineradicable memories of the past", but "thanks to these memories, we are able to reflect on the past."³⁴³ Fang's artistic achievement reflects his profound understanding of traditional Chinese ink art and capacity in adapting techniques and skills from both the traditional Chinese ink art and Western art. Being a successful artist in mainstream art, and at the same time staying open to and embracing different ideas and engaging with the changes in

³⁴¹ There is a large volume of writings on Fang Zengxian's art in China. Some selected key writings see in: Pan Gongkai, "内心的力量 – 我看方增先对于中国人物画中西融合的反思" ["The Force of Introspection: My view on Fang Zengxian's Reflections in the Integration of Chinese and Western in Chinese Figurative [Ink] Paintings"], 《方增先图文回顾录》 [*The Review with Pictures and Texts on Fang Zengxian*] (Shanghai Art Museum: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2007); Xu Hong, "方增先和他的水墨人物画" ["Fang Zengxian and His Figurative Ink Paintings"], in *Yishu Tiandi* 8 (1987); Wu Liang, "方增先近期水墨画" ["Recent Ink Paintings of Fang Zengxian"], in *Shuyuhua* 3 (1987); Feng Yuan, "当代中国需要有方增先这样的文化代言人 – 方增先人物画大展发言" ["Contemporary China Needs the Cultural Spokesperson Such as Fang Zengxian: A speech on Fang Zengxian's Figurative Ink Paintings"], in 《名家谈方增先》 [*Discussions on Fang Zengxian by Famous Experts*] (Shanghai Art Museum: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2011), pp.8-9; Shao Dazhen, "探索与创新之路 – 方增先的艺术历程与成就" ["The Road to Exploration and Innovation: Fang Zengxian's Art Journey and Achievements"], in 《名家谈方增先》 [*Discussions on Fang Zengxian by Famous Experts*] (Shanghai Art Museum: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2011), pp.12-17; Xu Jiang, "中西融合中守望传统、立足时代" ["Standing at the Present to Keep the Tradition and in Integration of Chinese and Western"], in 《名家谈方增先》 [*Discussions on Fang Zengxian by Famous Experts*] (Shanghai Art Museum: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2011), pp.18-19; Fan Dian, "无尽胸襟 – 范迪安谈方增先" ["Inexhaustible Mind: About Fang Zengxian"], in 《名家谈方增先》 [*Discussions on Fang Zengxian by Famous Experts*] (Shanghai Art Museum: People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2011), pp.20-21; Liu Xilin, "记住经典 – 方增先经典人物画选读" [Remember the Classic: Selected Readings of Fang Zengxian's Classic Figurative Ink Paintings], in 《名家谈方增先》 [*Discussions on Fang Zengxian by Famous Experts*] (Shanghai Art Museum: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2011), pp.24-27.

³⁴² Jiang Mei 江梅, "History, Time and Personal – Ink Master Fang Zengxian's Artistic Life," in exh cat. *The Trekker – A Retrospective of Fang Zengxian's Art* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 2007). English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

³⁴³ *ibid.*

contemporary art, Fang as director of SAM was ideally positioned to contribute to the process of policy-making.³⁴⁴

This chapter, therefore, highlights Fang's "learning to understand" attitude and his "experimenting from scratch" pragmatic approach, together with his firm belief in the need for variety in art and artistic languages and in engaging with the contemporary art scene. These characteristics, I argue, reflect the influence of modernism through personal contact with the early generation of modernists as teachers and colleagues in his early artistic career. They are also a testament to the spirit of individualism during his directorship of the art museum.³⁴⁵ This spirit of individualism will be explored further in the following discussion of the exhibition to unveil the new building.

In 1993, as SAM was working towards fully implementing the functions of a modern art museum, Fang and his expanded management team were joined by the new executive director Li Xiangyang.³⁴⁶ Li Xiangyang and Chen Long were instrumental in implementing the Museum's goal and in developing the Shanghai Biennale exhibition programme under Fang's leadership.³⁴⁷ A detailed examination of SAM's achievements in the 1990s is outside the scope of this thesis. However, it is worth noting, for example, the establishment of an education department and a development department within the Museum's structure, and the introduction of the Shanghai Biennale programme to showcase contemporary art. Those achievements reflect Fang's vision for the museum as an art institution with an international standard of museum practices, supporting the modern spirit manifested in Shanghai at the time. This forward-looking vision allowed SAM to play a leading role in the changes in public

³⁴⁴ Fang Zengxian has also been recognised as an art educator. His artistic exploration led him to establish a new teaching method in Chinese figurative ink paintings. His art and teaching methods were introduced into the traditional Chinese painting education system in China from the 1960s and his text book, titled "How to Paint the Ink Figurative Paintings" (怎样画水墨人物) published in 1965, has been reprinted in many editions. Over the decades, generations of artists have endeavoured to modernise traditional Chinese ink paintings, but there has been a lack of teaching and training textbooks in this field. Fang's special contribution to art education in China was his book filled an important gap in teaching and learning modern techniques on the traditional Chinese figurative ink paintings.

³⁴⁵ In my experience working at SAM (1987-1989), I witnessed Fang's managerial skills when I worked on various museum programmes. I would describe his manner as a form of playing "Taiji kongfu" (太极功夫). It looks soft in appearance, steering away the coming force to follow the flow. Then the counter comes at the right moment and with the right force.

³⁴⁶ Due to Fang's health, Li Xiangyang was appointed the executive director of SAM to assist Fang in 1993 and held that position until 2005. Li Xiangyang, interview by Lansheng Zhang, (Shanghai: 11 October 2011).

³⁴⁷ Li Xiangyang was the executive director of SAM from 1993 to 2005, a period that covers some significant art events and changes for the Museum. Li published a personal memoir of his experiences during this period. See Li Xiangyang, 《爱过这一行: 我在上海美术馆十二年》 [*Loved this Profession: My Twelve Years with SAM*] (Shanghai: Wenhui Publishing House, 2006).

art museums in China in the 1980s and to engage with art communities, especially with the contemporary art and artists.

Shanghai Art Museum: Key Exhibitions in the 1980s

The 1980s for Shanghai was a period of connecting with the contemporary art world outside China and reviving the legacy of early twentieth-century modernist art that had been disrupted by war, regime change and political turmoil. The relaxed political and social conditions of the 1980s also brought a change in the organisation of art exhibitions in Shanghai. There are two aspects to this change. One was the rise of the artist self-organised exhibitions. The second was that the government and official political organisations no longer dictated the exhibition programmes to the public art galleries and art museums. The first aspect has been discussed in Chapter 1. The following section will examine the second aspect through several key exhibitions shown at SAM.³⁴⁸

Shanghai Art Museum's New Building Completion Exhibition

As discussed earlier, SAM in its previous life as the SAEG was located in a 1930s building on the West Nanjing Road. During the demolition and reconstruction of the new Museum building on the same site (1983 – 1986), the SAEG temporarily relocated to the rear of the Shanghai Library building — the former Shanghai Race Club building.³⁴⁹ The long-awaited new building and the inaugural exhibition signified a historical moment — for the first time, Shanghai now had an art museum showing modern and contemporary art.

In celebration of the new building and the launch of its new public identity, SAM staged an independently curated exhibition, which opened on 9 October 1986. The phrase “independently curated” means that the exhibition was curated and organised by the staff of the Museum rather than co-organised with the government’s political apparatus. Such a practice is normal today in art museums throughout China, but that was not the situation then. Most exhibitions then were conceptualised and organised through official channels.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ SAM’s achievements in the 1980s inevitably had support from influential individuals within relevant government organisations and art institutions, namely Ni Tianzeng 倪天增 (Vice Mayor 1983-92), Yang Zhenlong 杨振龙 (Deputy Director of Shanghai Cultural Bureau mid 1980s period), Lui Meng 吕蒙 (Vice President of the Shanghai Artists Association 1980-96), He Zhenzhi 何振志 (Director of Art Theory and Research Department, Shanghai Artists Association 1956-90). Due to the limited scope of this thesis, those individuals and their contributions will not be examined here.

³⁴⁹ In 2000, SAM moved to the refurbished former Library Building until 2012 it moved again to the site of the Shanghai World Expo China Pavilion on the east side of the Huangpu River (Pudong 浦东).

³⁵⁰ See Xu Hong, “Chinese Art” in *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and Pacific*, pp.340-348.

The inaugural exhibition was called *Shanghai Art Museum's New Building Completion Exhibition* (上海美术馆新馆成立展). The exhibition title was rather prosaic; however, the exhibition itself was notable for its dynamic content and the courageous attempt to engage with local contemporary art by including a substantial number of experimental artworks by local avant-garde artists. It was the first time that artworks produced by such artists were showcased in a public art exhibition at an art museum in China. It was also the first time since 1949 that works of such an experimental nature from China were shown. The exhibition title reflected a distinctive characteristic that might be interpreted as political caution or an attitude of political distancing.³⁵¹ By letting individual artists speak through their art rather than utilising more eloquent or more revealing titles, the organisers succeeded in avoiding political censorship. This approach can be also found in the titles of two other critical art exhibitions: *The Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* launched at the end of January 1979, and the *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: Stage 1983* held in September 1983.³⁵² The SAM's *New Building Completion Exhibition* comprised two components. One was the exhibition of modern and contemporary art, and the other the display of 120 pieces of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Shanghai School Paintings in the permanent collection display area on the third floor of the building. The exhibits in the second component had been consolidated from the collections of five major art institutions including the Shanghai Museum, Shanghai Art Museum, Zhejiang Provincial Museum 浙江省博物馆, Xilenyinshe 西冷印社 and Duoyunxuan 朵云轩.³⁵³ Some of those exhibits became part of SAM's permanent collection through the Museum's application for the "government allocation" ("国家调拨").³⁵⁴ Several key political leaders in Shanghai at the time, such as Jiang Zemin 江泽民 (Shanghai City Mayor, and the President of Chinese Communist Party from 1989 to 2002), Rui Xingwen 芮杏文 (Municipal Party Secretary), and Zen Qinghong 曾庆红 (Vice Municipal Party Secretary), attended the opening ceremony of the New Building and the exhibition.

³⁵¹ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

³⁵² See the detailed discussion of the *The Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* and the *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: The Stage 1983* in Chapter 1.

³⁵³ See in Ding Xiyuan 丁曦元, ed., *Xu Gu, Ren Bonian, Wu Changshuo huaji [A Collection of Paintings by Xu Gu, Ren Bonian, Wu Changshuo]* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1986), p.2.

³⁵⁴ As all collections from state-owned museums are public assets, under special circumstances the government has the authority to transfer or to relocate collected works from one museum to another. This process is termed "government allocation" ("国家调拨") which Fang Zengxian referred in his address in the museum's publication on the fortieth anniversary of SAM. (See Fang Zengxian, "Forty Years of the Shanghai Art Museum," p.31). To accompany this significant display, SAM produced an elaborate catalogue in both soft and hard cover with an Introduction by Director Fang. See Ding Xiyuan, ed., *A Collection of Paintings by Xu Gu, Ren Bonian, Wu Changshuo*.

The significance of this exhibition can be analysed from four aspects: first, the unconventional (in the Chinese context) curatorial approach; second, the historical positioning; third, the engagement with local avant-garde art in the exhibition; and fourth, the exhibition's display. SAM's team under Fang Zengxian's leadership, as noted above, broke away from the usual official selection procedures of the past. All art exhibitions held in SAM in the past had had to go through an artwork selection process to obtain approval from the superior organisation, which was either the Shanghai Artists Association or the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture. Under Fang's leadership, however, the members of the executive team Chen Long and Zhang Jianjun carried out a wide consultation with the local art communities to consolidate a list of recommendations to form an "artistic selection committee" (艺术评委), which was equivalent to a curatorial team in Western museum practice, to select the artworks for this exhibition.³⁵⁵ The invited panel members included young avant-garde artists such as Chen Zhen 陈箴, Zhou Changjiang 周长江, Yang Hui 杨晖, and an arts editor Du Ning 杜宁 from the Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House.³⁵⁶ The title of the exhibition, as mentioned earlier, had no obvious political implications. This approach effectively succeeded in avoiding political censorship in the official approval process. It enabled the realisation of the curatorial strategy in making a space in the public art museum for young artists to show their experimental works alongside official mainstream art in the socialist realist style. Such a curatorial approach was new to art museum curatorial practice in China.

In response to an open submission process and by special invitation, the curatorial team selected 210 artworks from about 800 submissions from the Shanghai region. The selected artworks varied in styles ranging from realistic, figurative and impressionist, to abstract. Although impressionist and abstract art had started to appear in exhibitions in Shanghai in the early 1980s, this was the first time since 1949 that locally produced works of those types of art were shown in a state-owned art museum in China. Abstract paintings took centre stage in the show with the works of local avant-garde artists such as Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, Zhou Changjiang, Sun Liang and many others. Some of the works from those young artists were experimental and ground-breaking; for example, the early abstract oil painting (1979-80) and the *Primeval* series (1981-83) by Li Shan, the mixed media paintings from the *Have* series (1983-89) by Zhang Jianjun (Figure 45.), and the abstract oil paintings

³⁵⁵ From my research, such a form of independent art exhibition making without any official representatives in the selection of exhibits in a state-owned art museum level was unprecedented in China since 1949.

³⁵⁶ I have had conversations with the curatorial team members (except Du Ning) on this exhibition over the years and a formal audio recording interview including this topic with my former Shanghai Art Museum colleague Zhang Jianjun on 10 November 2004.

from the *Qi* series (1984-86) by Chen Zhen (Figure 46.).³⁵⁷ These art series are discussed in more detail later in this thesis in the artist case study chapters. SAM was unique in China in showing those types of works in the middle of the 1980s while NAMOC and other state-owned Chinese art museums did not engage with such contemporary and experimental art from China until the end of 1980s. The most recognisable example is the *China/Avant-garde Art Exhibition* at NAMOC in March 1989.³⁵⁸



Figure 45. Zhang Jianjun in front of his *Have* series displayed in the SAM's *New Building Completion Exhibition* (1986).



Figure 46. Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan standing near Chen Zhen's *Qi* series displayed in the SAM's *New Building Completion Exhibition* (1986).

³⁵⁷ Artist case studies on Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, and Chen Zhen are in Chapters 3, 4, and 6.

³⁵⁸ See information on this exhibition in footnote 103 in Chapter 1.

Through its inaugural exhibition, SAM clearly expressed the intention to embrace contemporary art. Not only did the exhibition reflect the spirit of individualism in Shanghai, it also acknowledged the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai through the selection of local modernist artworks from Liu Haisu 刘海粟, Lin Fengmian 林风眠, Guan Liang 关良, Wu Dayu 吴大羽, Yan Wenliang 颜文梁, and Chen Junde 陈俊德.³⁵⁹ I argue that the exhibition also broke the conventions since 1949 on how to display or hang artworks in museum exhibitions, again unprecedented in China. Those rules involved conforming to the hierarchy of the political positions and prominence of artists in the mainstream art system.³⁶⁰ Instead of adhering to such rules, the displays in this exhibition considered the genres of and the relationships between the artworks and the exhibition space as the primary concern. Most of the selected avant-garde artworks were of an experimental nature and large or multi-dimensional in size. Therefore, they were displayed in the main exhibition hall on the ground floor. The second floor was allocated to art from the mainstream at the time including impressionist-style paintings, a type of art produced in China that had been banned in the state-owned art museums after the 1950s. The third floor hosted the distinctive style of Chinese ink paintings of the “Shanghai School Paintings” (海派绘画) from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. According to one of the curators of the exhibition, such an exhibition display caused much displeasure at that time in both the political and art establishments.³⁶¹ Unconventional ideas and new perspectives were reflected in many aspects of this exhibition, including the exhibition’s official invitation card.³⁶²

³⁵⁹ As discussed below, the officials were dismayed by showing avant-garde artworks in this exhibition at the Art Museum. No exhibition catalogue or promotional materials or images were produced and no record on the art exhibited on the first and second floors was retained in SAM’s archives. Therefore, I am unable to show here the images of those artists’ works displayed in this exhibition. However, I can show in this thesis only a few images of the art displayed on the first floor from individual private collections.

³⁶⁰ Zhang Jianjun, Interview with Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

³⁶¹ *ibid.*

³⁶² As a young artist and designer affiliated with the local avant-garde artists at the time, I was invited by SAM to submit a design concept on a special invitation for the up-coming new building’s completion exhibition. Among many design concept submissions, mine was chosen for the official invitation to this important event. The invitation design turned a two-dimensional invitation card into a sculpture-like, three-dimensional standing paper object with the museum’s name in both English and Chinese in silver foil on a white background on the front. The aim was for the invitation to act as a prelude of this special exhibition that differed from the official art exhibitions of the time and to challenge conventional design practice and recipients’ experience of the usual more conservative exhibition invitations. The usual exhibition invitations in the mid-1980s were traditional single or two-fold cards and in a conservative graphic style.

Despite efforts to maintain the balance between political sensitivities and artistic integrity in the making of the exhibition, the Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department was dismayed by the showing of avant-garde artworks at the Art Museum.³⁶³ The exhibition was seen as pushing the boundaries and, although unaffected by any official interference, met with a cold reception from the authorities. However, the authorities did put a stop to the media reporting and promoting the exhibition. On the day of the exhibition, in spite of the high-profile attendees including the Mayor of Shanghai, only a simple announcement was made on the Shanghai TV News, and there were no media reviews after the opening.³⁶⁴ Party officials in the municipal government treated this exhibition as a non-event. The political pressure was intensely felt throughout the museum's offices and corridors as staff members avoided discussing this exhibition. No exhibition catalogue had been produced, nor were there any discussion seminars or symposiums held during or after the exhibition.³⁶⁵ Furthermore no photographs or materials from this exhibition were retained in the museum's archive.³⁶⁶ This exhibition has never been mentioned in the public debates regarding art in Shanghai. However, the Museum's first Year Book, published a year later, included some basic information about this exhibition with some images of artworks in the exhibition.³⁶⁷ Again, this reflects how tight the grip of the authorities on the art discourse in Shanghai remained in this period. As I have suggested earlier, the exhibition also demonstrates the role of the individuals in challenging the status quo.

The Last Supper Exhibition

The '85 Art New Wave movement spread avant-garde art activities across the country and elevated them to a new level in the mid-1980s. In December 1988, two months before the *China/Avant-garde Art Exhibition* in Beijing, twelve artists in Shanghai came together to stage a provocative performance/exhibition on the ground floor of SAM.³⁶⁸ The artists used lengths of bamboo to construct a 33-metre long tunnel-like passage from the entrance of

³⁶³ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai, 2004, 2008).

³⁶⁴ *ibid.*

³⁶⁵ SAM produced an elaborate catalogue in both soft and hard cover on the *Shanghai School* paintings, but no other printed material on this exhibition during the opening and exhibition period. [See Ding Xiyuan 丁曦元, ed., *A Collection of Paintings by Xu Gu, Ren Bonian, Wu Changshuo* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1986).]

³⁶⁶ I visited SAM's archive and library in May 2011. The only information I could find is the date and title of this exhibition in the archive.

³⁶⁷ See in Xu Hong and Zhang Lian, eds. *Fine Arts of the Century: Year Book of Shanghai State Art Museum 1986.10 – 1987.12* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 1988).

³⁶⁸ In the same month, *China's First Human Body Oil Painting Grand Exhibition* (“中国首次人体油画大展”) opened in NAMOC in Beijing (December 1988). See more information about this exhibition in this chapter footnote 317.

SAM to a defined closed space inside the gallery insulated with painted linen materials. In the defined space, there was a long table in the centre. On top of the table, food and Coca-Cola drinks were scattered around. Eleven artists disguised themselves in costumes of their own design, consisting of white cotton fabric coats and red fabric masks, and assumed poses similar to those of the figures in the famous European Renaissance mural, *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. Some random signs were laid around the table and, noticeably, a vacant seat had a sign on it that said “Went to the toilet” (上厕所了). The empty seat implied the absence of an important person from the scene. (Figures 47, 48, 49, 50.)



Figure 47. The construction of the passageway for *The Last Supper* performance in December 1988.



Figure 48. Artists performance at *The Last Supper* opening event.



Figure 49. Artists performance at *The Last Supper* opening event.



Figure 50. Artists performance at *The Last Supper* opening event.

The performance opened with the artists moving into centre stage in random order making a variety of gestures and striking various erratic poses. Those gestures and poses appeared to have no relation to the religious content of the original work by da Vinci, but rather were in the style of a parody. Critics have interpreted this performance differently. For example, Thomas Berghuis described it as “reminiscent of ritual procedures performed by some kind of secret society” and “a makeshift traditional Chinese burial ritual for the dead.”³⁶⁹ The characters remained mute throughout the performance with the artists’ self-recorded background sounds which included ringing of a church bell, whispering, crying, and loud cheering randomly played out in different volumes during the performance. The opening attracted a large audience from art circles and the public who queued outside the passage waiting to take turns to view the performance. As a staff member of SAM, I witnessed and experienced the emotion, excitement and curiosity that the artists’ performance generated inside the performing space and outside in the waiting queue. The performance lasted approximately 20 minutes before it was stopped by the authorities. The reason given was the “potential fire hazard” and the performance was not allowed to

³⁶⁹ Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2006), p.75.

continue, and the exhibition was closed.³⁷⁰ (Figure 51.) Following the closure, the artists acted quickly to find a “floral-ring” (花圈) a custom in China to present at a ceremony of death, to commemorate the event on the site. This act was seen as part of the performance by the artists that added a meaningful statement in the context of contemporary Chinese art of the time.³⁷¹



Figure 51. A newspaper clipping on the article of “Black Wreath Hung on ‘The Last Supper!’.”

Artist-organised exhibitions represented a significant attribute of the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai. This attribute, as I argued in Chapter 1, was part of the “studio discourse” in Shanghai.³⁷² The main initiators of this exhibition were the artists, Li Shan and Xu Longsen 徐龙森, who were also involved in organising the *Concave-Convex Exhibition* earlier in November 1986, a month after *SAM New Building’s Completion Exhibition*. Li and Xu intended to make a second *Concave-Convex* exhibition, this time with a clear “cultural orientation” (文化指向) and “contemporary relevance” (当下针对性).³⁷³ Ideas for the exhibition were discussed by the participating artists who worked together to create the

³⁷⁰ In my later interview with two participating artists Zhang Jianjun in 2004 and Li Shan in 2011, both gave detailed accounts on this exhibition. See also a recent publication of Biljana Ciric, *History in the Making, Shanghai 1979-2009: Artists Interviews & Work Archives* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 2010), p.515.

³⁷¹ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai, 2004, 2008).

³⁷² For the definition on “studio discourse” see the Introduction under the subheading “Shanghai at the forefront of avant-garde art in China in the 1980s,” and a further discussion in Chapter 1 under the subheading “National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s.”

³⁷³ Biljana Ciric, *History in the Making, Shanghai 1979-2009*, p.182.

final exhibition's form and content.³⁷⁴ Participants in the performance included not only artists but also art critics such as Wu Liang from Shanghai and Li Xianting from Beijing.³⁷⁵ The art critic Li Xu from Shanghai was also involved in preparing a pre-recorded background sound. The individual proposals for this exhibition were rejected at the first round of the official approval process. Following discussion among the participating artists, the performance art-form was chosen, and the content was shaped collectively. It was the artist Sun Liang who came up with the name *The Last Supper* for the exhibition.

Potent, ironic, and potentially subversive, an avant-garde exhibition of this kind was an unprecedented event in a major public art museum in China in the 1980s. It demonstrated an unbroken engagement with local contemporary art at SAM, as well as the close relationship between Fang and his senior and curatorial/research staff. It also showed that SAM was willing to embrace the artists' proposal for a self-organised group exhibition in the vanguard art style. Three participating artists — Zhang Jianjun, Zhou Changjiang, and Wang Jinguo, who held influential positions in major art institutes in Shanghai at the time including SAM — were instrumental in bringing about this exhibition.³⁷⁶ In the approval process, they succeeded in convincing the officials that performance art was a new form in the visual arts and that it was important to show this art form at an art museum.

The Last Supper exhibition was a comprehensive art event. It was a parody that encapsulated all the attributes of avant-garde art in China in the 1980s. The collective effort that went into the show was emphasised by the uniformity of the performers' appearance,

³⁷⁴ The final list of participating artists were Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Sun Liang 孙良, Song Haidong 宋海东, Wang Jingguo 王景国, Zhou Changjiang 周长江, Xiao Xiaolan 肖小兰, Wu Liang, Li Xianting, Xu Longsen 徐龙森, and Pei Jing 裴晶.

³⁷⁵ Li Xianting trained at CAFA as a brush and ink artist and graduated in 1978. He worked as an art critic and editor of *Meishu* (Fine Art) in 1979. In his publication *Performance Art in China* in stating the relationship between artists and art critics, Thomas Berghuis briefly mentioned *The Last Supper* performance among other events in the 1980s: "In China, there is a strong connection between artists and art critics, such as Li Xianting, but artists also see part of their work as becoming art critics themselves. In this context, it makes sense that Wei Guangqing lists these supposedly separated fields of arts practice together. [...] The relationship between artists and art critics in the staging of performances can also be seen in the group work *The Last Supper* that was staged in Shanghai in December 1988. [...]" (See Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone8, 2006), p.75.

³⁷⁶ The Shanghai Oil and Sculpture Institute and its sister organisation the Shanghai Chinese Ink Paintings Institute are government-funded art institutions. Well-established artists and young talents from the Shanghai region were employed by these institutions with the primary tasks to create artwork and to conduct research under the Party's supervision to promote the Party's cultural policy. Since the "reform and opening-up" policy of the 1980s, restrictions on the activities of artists relaxed as to what type of art they could produce and the research they undertook. (See "40 Years of Shanghai Oil Painting & Sculpture Institute" <<http://www.cnarts.net/cweb/Exhibition/show/youdiaoyuan40/lunwen.asp>>, viewed 02 August 2017.

which was also a criticism directed at the then popular trend of collectivism in China. As well as parodying collectivism, the performance also satirised the obsession with philosophical subjects and Western art forms at the time. It showed an ambivalence towards religion and focused on re-evaluating the relationship between traditional and contemporary art. This short-lived exhibition was welcomed by the organising committee of the China avant-garde exhibition from Beijing soon after its closure. Much later in an interview, Li Shan recalled the dynamism of “strong individuality” among the participating artists, while putting together the exhibition proposal. This was not an easy task given the lack of a collaborative base and the usual disinterest in collaboration in art production of the artists in Shanghai.³⁷⁷ Therefore, *The Last Supper* exhibition proved impossible to repeat. However, this Shanghai exhibition set a precedent in art museum curatorial practice in accepting for the first time in China an artists’ self-organised avant-garde exhibition proposal. I also argue that it was a precursor to the forthcoming *China Avant-Garde Exhibition* in NAMOC held in Beijing two months later.³⁷⁸ As a symbolic act, *The Last Supper* exhibition encapsulated a decade of the avant-garde art movement in China and signalled the arrival of a new era.

2000 Shanghai Biennale

2000 Shanghai Biennale provides the best example of the significant role SAM played in the development of contemporary art in China. In this section, I will explore the historical significance of the *2000 Shanghai Biennale* to highlight the importance of SAM’s achievements in the 1980s and its continuous impact. I argue that the success of the Biennale was a result of the work done by key individuals within SAM since the 1980s with the commitment on its engagement of the contemporary art.³⁷⁹

At the turn of the millennium, SAM launched its third Biennale exhibition. Unlike the previous two Biennale exhibitions, which focused predominantly on the national art discourse reflected in the works of selected artists mainly from China with a few overseas

³⁷⁷ Biljana Ciric, *History in the Making, Shanghai 1979-2009*, p.182.

³⁷⁸ This is not a presumptuous claim as one of the key organisers for the *China Avant-Garde Exhibition* Li Xianting, while not part of the process of making the exhibition, was a participant in *The Last Supper* performance. Li was on a research trip to Shanghai and other places for the preparation of the *China Avant-Garde Exhibition*. He knew the key artists, Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun, well and they invited him to join the performance.

³⁷⁹ This refers to SAM’s *New Building Completion Exhibition* and the first Shanghai Biennale. The first Shanghai Biennale was launched in 1996 with the theme “Open Space.” It focused mainly on contemporary art in China. The second Biennale was held in 1998 with the theme “Inheritance and Exploration” with a focus on the development of traditional Chinese ink art.

Chinese artists,³⁸⁰ the 2000 *Shanghai Biennale* showcased national and international contemporary artworks together, and in equal numbers, for the first time in a state-owned art museum. Since its inaugural exhibition, SAM had been open to new international curatorial practices through international exhibitions and had curated exhibitions to go abroad.³⁸¹ The previous two Biennales had prepared the Museum to take on further challenges. This time, however, the curatorial team consisted of an equal number of local and international curators including Li Xu (SAM staff), Zhang Qing 张晴 (SAM staff), Toshio Shimizu (Japan), and Hou Hanru (originally from Guangzhou but living and working in France). It was the first time a Chinese art museum had invited international curators to work alongside the Museum's curators. The choice of the international curators was carefully considered. The primary criterion was a good understanding of Chinese culture, and the ability to communicate culturally between China and the outside world. The principal consideration was the ability to interpret the fundamentals in Chinese and Western cultures to different audiences.³⁸² The title of the Biennale was translated into English as *Shanghai Spirit* (*Haishang – Shanghai* 海上 – 上海). In the Biennale's exhibition catalogue, the director Fang Zengxian explained that the "Shanghai Spirit" referred to "the eager readiness of this city to assimilate various cultural elements and renovate its own cultural tradition."³⁸³ One of the Biennale's international curators Hou Hanru remarked: "If there is really something that can be called '*Shanghai Spirit*', the aforementioned qualities of cultural openness, multiplicity, hybridity, and radical attitude of innovation are at the core of it."³⁸⁴

³⁸⁰ The first Shanghai Biennale invited three internationally well-known Chinese artists Chen Zhen, Zhang Jianjun, and Wenda Gu to participate in the exhibition in 1996. During the preparation of the Shanghai Biennale programme, SAM established an organising committee and an academic committee. The academic committee consisted of representatives of contemporary artists, art professionals from key art institutions, and art critics from the Shanghai region mainly concerned with curatorial matters. The committee provided advice on a theme for the Biennale and on the selection of curators and participating artists. This system has remained in place for the Shanghai Biennale programme up to today. (Information provided by Fang Zengxian during my interview at his Shanghai home on 10 January 2004. Also see '96 Shanghai Biennale exh cat. Shanghai Art Museum, 1996.)

³⁸¹ In the publication "*Retrospection and Outlook 1956-1996*" in 1996, Fang Zengxian reviewed SAM's initiative for its ten-year international programme (1986 to 1996) and mentioned a number of international exhibitions. In particular, Fang acknowledged the "*Yoichi Takeuchi Art Collection Exhibition*" hosted by SAM in October 1994, which was an early learning experience in handling a large-scale high-standard international exhibition. The exhibition consisted of 64 artworks from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century European masters. See Fang Zengxian, "*Forty Years of the Shanghai Art Museum*", p.17.

³⁸² Li Xiangyang, Interview with Lansheng Zhang, (Shanghai: 11 October 2011). See also in Hou Hanru, *On The Mid-Ground*, "Shanghai, a Naked City: Curatorial Notes, Shanghai Biennale 2000" (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), pp.230-245; Wu Hung, ed., *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, between East and West* (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2001).

³⁸³ Fang Zengxian, Preface, in *Shanghai Biennale 2000* exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000), p.V.

³⁸⁴ Hou Hanru, "Shanghai Spirit: A Special Modernity", in *Shanghai Biennale 2000* exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000), pp.IIIV-IIIIV.

Hou's definition complements in many ways the qualities I have described in this thesis as the essence of 'the spirit of individualism' in art in Shanghai in the 1980s. I suggest that the Biennale's title *Shanghai Spirit* also encompassed definitions of that spirit of individualism as well as the legacy of modernism in art in Shanghai in the early twentieth century that is reflected in the themes of this thesis.

The curatorial team was overseen by an academic committee composed of representatives of artists, art critics, the Museum's director and executive, other key figures from major art institutions, as well as the unavoidable representation of government officials.³⁸⁵ Commentators noted the sophistication of the curatorial programme, the various art forms in the exhibition displays, and the organisational skills demonstrated in the staging of the exhibition. Such professionalism not only impressed invited VIPs and art professionals but also showed the ambition of SAM organisers to meet international museums standards in staging contemporary art events.³⁸⁶

The Biennale showcased 67 artists' works with over 300 artworks from 18 countries and regions. The artworks included oil paintings, Chinese ink paintings, prints, sculptures, photographs, installations, videos, new media, and architecture. The juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary art was claimed as a curatorial strategy.³⁸⁷ The Biennale's impact was unprecedented nationwide, although responses from the public and art circles were mixed. Many art critics and historians responded cautiously to this bold act, while others expressed concerns about its sustainability.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁵ The other key figures from major art institutions included Xu Jiang, the president of the China Art Academy, and Zhou Changjiang, Director of the Shanghai Oil Painting and Sculpture Institute.

³⁸⁶ Commentaries were in various media, including: online media 东方视觉网 [English: ionly.com.cn], one can read a number of reports about the exhibition of the Biennale. See Yang Zhanye 杨展业, "2000 年上海双年展" 磁力"不小" ["The Magnet of 2000 Shanghai Biennale"], <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/zhanlan/showAtt_2176.html>, viewed October 16, 2011; Shang Xiaolan 尚晓岚, "2000 上海双年展—中国现代艺术里程碑" ["2000 Shanghai Biennale: The milestone of the Chinese modern art"], <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/zhanlan/showAtt_2172.html>, viewed October 16, 2011; Gao Brothers, "太热闹了! 太精彩了!" [Very Lively! Bravo!], <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/zhanlan/showAtt_2184.html>, viewed October 16, 2011; to list a few. Translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

³⁸⁷ Hou Hanru, Zhu Qi, "'We've Become True Individuals': An Interview with Hou Hanru by Zhu Qi," in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2001), pp.252-258.

³⁸⁸ For examples, see Xu Hong, "选择和被选择—2000 年上海双年展" ["Choose or Be Chosen-2000 Shanghai Biennale"], in *Art Research* 3 (2001): 18-20; Liu Xiaochun, "'从地下走向国外' 的状态应该改变—上海双年展的价值" ["The Condition of 'from underground to overseas' Should Change: The Values of the Shanghai Biennale"], <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/zhanlan/showAtt_2181.html>, viewed October 16, 2011; He Qing 河清, "开放与跟仿" ["Opening and with Imitation"], <

The 2000 *Shanghai Biennale* symposium was held simultaneously with the opening celebration under the title of “Shanghai Spirit - A Special Modernity”, with “Future City: Culture in Fusion” as its main theme.³⁸⁹ During the symposium, several local critics and curators expressed their unease regarding Western dominance in the discourse of contemporary art. One of the goals of the Biennale was to stimulate discussion on the issue of “discourse power” (话语权), which may be explained as the “right to judge and convey value” on contemporary Chinese art in the international art arena.³⁹⁰ This topic was first raised in the catalogue essay of the Biennale written by a local curator Zhang Qing.³⁹¹ It was also raised at the symposium by local critics such as Xu Jiang 许江 and Wang Nanming 王南溟, and quickly became a major topic of discussion among the artists, curators and art theorists in subsequent years. For example, in an article published in 2008, Lü Peng explores the issue of “discourse power” by placing the changes in the art system and from the perspective of ideas in a historical context.³⁹² The “discourse power” discussion revolved, as stated above, around the right to judge or determine, and the right to choose in the contemporary art discourse. On a national level, it was about how contemporary Chinese art could strengthen its position in the international arena. On a global level, it highlighted the necessity for China to have “discourse power” in terms of the country’s engagement and participation in the contemporary art discourse. This debate in various media and forums extended from the theoretical to the pragmatic, a reflection of the political and economic changes in China.

As the “reform and opening-up” policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s took hold a popular expression emerged “接轨” with the literal translation of “connecting the rails”, meaning “to connect to international standards.” The expression indicates clearly the Chinese Government’s eagerness to connect to the global economy across all areas.³⁹³ The

http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/zhanlan/showAtt_2182.html>, viewed October 16, 2011; Wu Hung, “The 2000 Shanghai Biennale: The Making of a ‘Historical Event’ in Contemporary Chinese Art”, in *ART AsiaPacific* 31 (2001): pp.42-49.

³⁸⁹ I was invited as a special researcher to assist in organising the opening programme of the symposium.

³⁹⁰ Li Xiangyang, Interview with Lansheng Zhang, (Shanghai: 11 October 2011).

³⁹¹ Zhang Qing, “Beyond Left and Right: Transformation of the Shanghai Biennale,” in *2000 Shanghai Biennale*, exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000), p.xvi.

³⁹² Lü Peng, “艺术体制与观念的变迁 – 对上海双年展和广州三年展新世纪两端展览的历史陈述的问题分析” [The Changes of Art System and Idea – An Analysis of the Historical Account and Problems of Shanghai Biennale and Guangzhou Triennial Exhibition], in 《画刊》 [*Art Monthly*] 10 (2008) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Art Publishing House, 2008).

³⁹³ This expression is an extension of an earlier slogan from the 1980s “Towards the world” (走向世界). In the exhibition catalogue article in 1993, Nicholas Jose analysed such political slogans from a historical perspective

call for international engagement from all sectors became louder and more widespread in the late 1990s. The impact of globalisation on both society and ideology in China provided the opportunity for SAM to work from within the system and to take a step forward to expand its vision of engagement with the contemporary art locally and internationally. In the 1980s, SAM had appeared to be domestically focused in comparison to the Shanghai Museum's active international exhibition programmes, which were a priority under the leadership of the Museum's Director Ma Chenyuan 马承源. Various international programmes were developed based on the Museum's rich collections and the institution's long history in overseas exhibition exchanges and lending objects from museum's collections to overseas museums.³⁹⁴ The Shanghai Museum had been actively hosting international art exhibitions in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The transformation from an Art Exhibition Gallery to the Art Museum in the first part of the 1980s provided the Shanghai Art Museum a mandate to develop its international engagement. Engaging with contemporary art from the very outset of its rebirth as an art museum, SAM has gradually built up its experiences and capacities to curate and host international exhibitions, culminating in the creation of the first Shanghai Biennale exhibition in 1996.³⁹⁵ The Shanghai Biennale 2000 proved to be a triumph for the

and demonstrated how they were reflected in contemporary Chinese art. He stated: "*Towards the world* also applied to art, where it signalled bumper harvests of productivity, emanating from artist groups rather than individuals, bold liberation from constraints on self-expression (especially erotic expression), ransacking of artistic traditions without regard to nation, history or cultural context, explosion of the boundaries that abstracted high art from the general visual culture and material world, and defiance of literal or utilitarian meaning in favour of the journey out, towards humanity, towards existential being, towards the cosmos. Chinese art would plunder the universe in order to conquer it." See Nicholas Jose, "Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989 – 93," in exhibition catalogue. *China's New Art, Post – 1989*, pp.xxxvii–xl, at p.xxxviii.

³⁹⁴ Caroline Turner noted: "[...] since 1980 [to 2002], the Shanghai Museum has sent over fifty exhibitions to sixteen countries in Asia, America, Europe and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) and also held sixty art exhibitions in Shanghai from outside, including contemporary art from Europe and Australia." (See Caroline Turner, "Linking Past and Future: Cultural Exchanges and Cross-Cultural Engagements in four Asian museums", *Humanities Research*, vol IX, no 1 (2002): pp.13 – 28, at pp.15–16.) Further examples were provided by Turner in footnote 5 of the same paper, such as an early US example of exchange, René-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé, *Treasures from the Shanghai Museum: 6000 years of Chinese Art*, Shanghai Museum and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1983 and *Treasures from the Shanghai Museum*, Queensland Art Gallery, 1990. This article can also be found online at <http://pressfiles.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p12791/pdf/3_Turner.pdf>. Another important exhibition of *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, through official cultural exchange programmes, was shown at the Shanghai Museum in 1981 as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

³⁹⁵ Fang Zengxian, "Forty Years of the Shanghai Art Museum", pp.17–18. The 1990s was an important transitional period from local to international art exhibitions for SAM. Exhibitions came from different channels including the country to country official exchange programmes. The first Shanghai Biennale exhibition established in 1996 was, as I argue, a major strategic initiative of exhibition programming for the Museum to engage with international contemporary art. (Li Xiangyang, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 11 October 2011).

internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art, or “Guojihua 国际化”

[“internationalisation”].³⁹⁶ Not surprisingly, given the international success of the exhibition and international commendations, the city’s government quickly incorporated the Biennale event into the Annual Shanghai International Arts Festival programme for an every two-years event.

Despite criticisms at the time, the 2000 Biennale has been recognised as a breakthrough in contemporary Chinese art.³⁹⁷ It drew large audiences from across the country and brought contemporary art into the conversation of the masses.³⁹⁸ The success of the Shanghai Biennale 2000 worked effectively to confirm the Shanghai city government in its approach to contemporary art and to view art as part of the city’s economic potential.³⁹⁹ It was a turning point in bringing contemporary art practices and contemporary exhibitions from a marginalised position to a prominent place in the public arena. In his catalogue essay of the Biennale, one of the international curators Hou Hanru 侯瀚如 states that “SAM is at the forefront of China’s open policy of engagement with the world, open to the principles of diversity and hybridity through the promotion of innovative art and ideas.”⁴⁰⁰ By adopting the international biennial form of the contemporary art exhibition and the standards of international curatorial and art museum practice, SAM has “become a site of the renegotiation of ideas of living artists trying to find a pathway through the complexities of

³⁹⁶ The success of the Biennale in the internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art was widely reported in the media. For examples, see Lily Tung, “Spreading Openness with a 3rd Shanghai Biennale”, in *The New York Times*, May 30, 2001. < <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/30/arts/arts-abroad-spreading-openness-with-a-3rd-shanghai-biennale.html> >, viewed June 21, 2010; Wu Hung, “The 2000 Shanghai Biennale: The Making of a ‘Historical Event’ in Contemporary Chinese Art” (2001); Pi Li 皮力, “关于上海双年展和双年展之外的展览” [“About the Shanghai Biennale and the Exhibitions Outside of the Biennale”], <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/zhanlan/showAtt_2178.html>, viewed October 16, 2011.

³⁹⁷ Curators Li Xu (Museum staff) and Hou Hanru (international independent curator) viewed the Biennale as a major breakthrough through their exhibition catalogue’s essays and public interviews. This view has been echoed by other local and international critics from various perspectives. See Li Xu and Keith Andony, “Taking a Look Behind the Scene: An interview with Li Xu by Keith Andony”, in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung, (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2001), pp.261-264; Hou Hanru, “Shanghai Spirit: A Special Modernity,” in *2000 Shanghai Biennale* exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000), pp.viii-viii. Many other international critics had expressed the same view in the media during and after the Biennale exhibition.

³⁹⁸ In a joint news report, journalists Li Jian and Yang Zhanyi described: “Rivers of visitors flow in [to the Museum], many of them come especially from other places even overseas.” (参观的人群如河水般流淌着, 他们中有不少人专程从外地甚至海外赶来。) See Li Jian and Yang Zhanyi, 都市里的艺术激流—漫步 2000 上海双年展 [Art Torrent: Stroll through 2000 Shanghai Biennale], <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/zhanlan/showAtt_2173.html>, viewed October 16, 2011.

³⁹⁹ Fang Zengxian, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 2009, 2017); Li Xiangyang, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 11 October 2011).

⁴⁰⁰ Hou Hanru, “Shanghai Spirit: A Special Modernity,” in *2000 Shanghai Biennale* exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000), p.viii.

the present,”⁴⁰¹ and has led art museum practices in China toward a new direction by connecting contemporary Chinese art discourse to the global context. In the Biennale’s exhibition catalogue, the Museum’s director makes the following remarks.

[...] The significance of its [the biennale’s] success will far transcend the exhibition itself. As an established activity of international scale and academically addressed to the issues of globalization, post-colonialism and regionalism, etc., Shanghai Biennale will set a good example for our Chinese colleagues and is bound to secure its due status among other world famous biennial art exhibitions.⁴⁰²

It is worth noting that there was a reaction to the 2000 Biennale and other such events from some in the local avant-garde art community. An example is the controversial exhibition “不合作的方式”(English title *Fuck Off*) curated by Ai Weiwei 艾未未 and Feng Boyi 冯博 which was part of so called “fringe exhibitions” held during the 2000 Shanghai Biennale.⁴⁰³ There has been discussion about contemporary art events, such as art biennales,

⁴⁰¹ Caroline Turner, “Linking past and Future: Cultural Exchanges and Cross-Cultural Engagements in four Asian museums,” *Humanities Research*, vol. IX, no 1 (2002): 13-28, p.18.

⁴⁰² Fang Zengxian, “Preface,” in *2000 Shanghai Biennale* exh cat. (Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000), p.v.

⁴⁰³ During the official *2000 Shanghai Biennale* there were simultaneous art exhibitions launched in local private galleries or art spaces that were organised by artists and independent curators. Those “fringe exhibitions” added dynamic and sometimes controversial elements, which unlike the official Biennale, were not embraced by the government. The most well-known *Fuck Off* exhibition, the literal meaning of the Chinese title “不合作方式” [“Ways of Non-Cooperation”], curated by artist Ai Weiwei and art critic Feng Boyi was staged to coincide with the opening of the Biennale at the Eastlink Gallery a private gallery in Shanghai. The exhibition presented several provocative experimental installation and performance works including a work where the artist appeared to be eating a human foetus. The work was also criticised by Western critics such as Britta Erickson etc. According to a Randian review <http://www.randian-online.com/np_review/fuck-off-an-uncooperative-approach>, the work was not displayed at the exhibition, but the image included in the catalogue. Also controversial was Yang Fudong’s “The First Intellectual” which was removed from the show – reportedly highly sensitive for portraying a negative image of Shanghai’s development. Reactions from local artists opposing institutional control of art is not unique to China; however, the exhibition was closed by the authorities after three days. For further discussion on the fringe exhibitions during the Biennale see: Ma Qinzong 马钦忠, ed., 《中国上海 2000 年双年展及外围展》 [*Documents of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale and its Satellite Exhibitions*] (Wuhan: Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House 湖北美术出版社, 2002); Chen Lüsheng 陈履生, “以艺术的名义” [In the Name of Art], in *Meishu zhiyou* (28 March 2003). <https://www.ixueshu.com/document/2f632a3ed13c69c5.html#field_box>, viewed 10 March 2015; Yang Zhong 杨盅, “以艺术的名义: “中国前卫艺术的穷途末路” [“In the Name of Art: Chinese Avant-Garde Art at the End of Road”], in *Meishu Guancha* (15 April 2001). <https://www.ixueshu.com/document/cda0c94f109b4617318947a18e7f9386.html#field_box>, viewed 11 March 2015; Tang Fengming 唐凤鸣, “不仅仅是穷途末路: 也谈中国的前卫艺术” [“Not Only at the End of Road: Discussion about the Chinese Avant-Garde Art”], in *Art Journal* vol.29 no.2 (2001): at 27-28; Charles Merewether, “The Freedom of Irreverence: Ai Weiwei,” in *ArtAsiaPacific* 53 (2007). <<http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/53/TheFreedomOfIrreverenceAiWeiwei>>, viewed 03 August 2018; Ai

being run by the state-owned art museums in China especially by some artists and art critics who, as Charles Merewether has suggested, “defined themselves in opposition to the institutional appropriation of art”.⁴⁰⁴

In this chapter, I have discussed the bureaucratic structure for art institutions and art museums in the PRC and how such a structure was designed for the Party’s continuing control and for implementing Party policies. I have also examined how, with no other alternatives to the Museum functioning under such a bureaucratic structure, the Shanghai Art Museum Director, Fang Zengxian, and his management team succeeded in bringing about changes by working within the system in the 1980s. Under Fang’s leadership, SAM was able to develop a new model of museum practice to engage with contemporary art that departed from the passive role of institutions in the past and adopted an active responsive role, which required constant negotiation to balance the demands of both the government bureaucracy and the local art community. Fang and his team exemplified the qualities that enabled individuals to implement a vision through highly developed inter-personal and political skills, to work with and inspire a curatorial/research team and to gain the trust of political superiors. They saw the need for more modern approaches to museum practice but were pragmatic in relation to the political and bureaucratic realities of the system in China at the time. Through a discussion of selected key exhibitions, I have argued that the individuals involved in the making of those exhibitions also reflected the spirit of individualism and that their ideas resonated with the legacy of modernism in art from the early twentieth century in Shanghai. Those exhibitions are further evidence that the Shanghai Art Museum took a leadership role in building the modern Chinese art museum and art museum curatorial practices, as well as engaging with contemporary and experimental art in the 1980s.

Weiwei and Feng Boyi, “Preface to Fuck Off,” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), pp.354-355; and Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, pp.151-152.

⁴⁰⁴ Charles Merewether, “The Freedom of Irreverence: Ai Weiwei.” Due to the limited scope of this thesis, further discussion on the topic of art biennales in China cannot be treated here.

Chapter 3.

Zhang Jianjun: Experimenting in the Search for Eternal Elements

Because I have always opposed the (idea of) collectives, therefore, I have been an outsider from the collectives. [...] But I participated very little in the collective art activities.

[...] Sometimes [I] think [I] was very stubborn then. First, I didn't participate in collective activity. Second, I didn't leave texts. I hoped to use very pure language to express art, but not [express] through other languages, manifestos, conceptual explanations etc. So I consciously did not leave any text. This was my act at the time.⁴⁰⁵

Zhang Jianjun

Zhang Jianjun should be considered one of the pioneers in avant-garde art practice in China. I argue that through his experimental art practice in the 1980s he made significant contributions to the change of aesthetic values in contemporary art in Shanghai and in China in the period of the 1980s. However, I also argue these contributions have been insufficiently recognised in both international and Chinese art discourses. Zhang Jianjun's defence of individualism and opposition to collective art groups and movements and his experimental art practice made him a crucial figure in the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the 1980s. This chapter will examine the significance of his experimental art practice and his role as a catalyst in bringing about change at the Shanghai Art Museum as an art administrator in the 1980s.

The discussion and examination of Zhang Jianjun's life and his work in this chapter is based on many extensive conversations I have had with the artist since the early 1980s including three recorded interviews (2004, 2008, 2017), as well as other source materials cited in the footnotes. Zhang was born in Shanghai in 1955 and his art education and artistic career were deeply rooted in the city. He was one of the "children of the Cultural

⁴⁰⁵ Original quote in Chinese: "因为那时候我始终是反对群体,所以我一直是在群体之外, [.....] 但是作为艺术的群体活动我很少参加。" "[.....] 有时候想想那时候的想法很固执, 我一个不参与群体活动, 第二个我不留文字, 我希望艺术用很纯粹的语言去表达, 而不是通过其他的语言、宣言、观念解释等等。所以我有意识的没有留任何文字, 这是我当时的做法。" See Zhang Jianjun, "Interview by Wen Zijian," in *Material Of The Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art From 1980 – 1990*, Asian Art Archive, Hong Kong. <<http://www.china1980s.org/en/about.aspx>>, viewed 05 October 2010. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

Revolution,” born in the 1950s and grew up under the shadow of the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁰⁶ I first met Zhang through our art teacher Li Zhiqin 李志勤 in Shanghai in early 1970s when we attended Li’s private art lessons. I have been able to study Zhang’s art at first hand since the late 1970s and to follow his art trajectory up to the present. Like many Shanghai artists of his generation, Zhang’s pathway to art was influenced by followers of early modernist art in Shanghai. His own generation of artists, by contrast, grew up in an environment dominated by ideologically-driven political propaganda art, largely in the style of socialist realism. As discussed in earlier chapters there was a revival of modernist art practices in Shanghai in the late 1970s and the early 1980s,⁴⁰⁷ but only a small number of artists went beyond these trends to explore new forms through their own original artistic expression. Zhang was one of them. During the 1980s, he produced some ground-breaking artworks that were unprecedented in China at the time and challenged the existing aesthetic values causing a strong reaction from the authorities.⁴⁰⁸ Despite this criticism, his art was purchased by international collectors; some individual works were sold at arguably the highest prices in China in the early 1980s.⁴⁰⁹

I will demonstrate throughout this chapter that a combination of influences contributed to Zhang’s pioneering experimental art including his art training, contacts with earlier generation modernist artists, and his individualist stand in rejecting the collective ethos of the time. In examining Zhang’s art practice from the end of the 1970s and through the 1980s, I suggest the specificities of China’s socio-political environment had a special significance for artistic practice. That practice could be either a clear expression of the artist’s thoughts and emotions, or a radical avant-garde statement to exercise freedom of expression and to challenge the conformity and constraints of official art. Zhang’s choices in his art practice and his actions in distancing himself from the collective art movement represent the distinctive quality of individualism that, I argue, characterised avant-garde art

⁴⁰⁶ I use this phrase to describe people, including myself, who were born in the 1950s and early 1960s and grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). There is a similar expression for another group born ten years later. Claire Roberts used the term “the lucky ones” in a catalogue of the exhibition *Go Figure: Contemporary Chinese Portraiture* to describe the artists “who came of age after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, and had the opportunity to attend university, or were born in the decades thereafter.” See Claire Roberts, “Go Figure, Contemporary Chinese Portraiture,” in *Go Figure: Contemporary Chinese Portraiture*, p.10.

⁴⁰⁷ See related discussions in the Introduction under the subheading “Shanghai at the Forefront of Avant-Garde Art in China in the 1980s,” and in Chapter 1 under the subheading “National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s.”

⁴⁰⁸ The reaction of the authorities has been discussed in Chapter 1 under the subheading “*Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983*” and will be discussed further later in this Chapter under the subheading “From Political Censorship to the First Prize Award.”

⁴⁰⁹ See list of collections in the artist’s biography in Appendix 1.

in Shanghai in that decade. I also argue that the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai heavily influenced Zhang's nascent artistic expression.

The Modernist Influence

Zhang's artistic talents were evident from a very young age, earning him a reputation as a "little artist" in kindergarten, and as he says, he "was often punished at home for drawing all over the walls."⁴¹⁰ Shanghai's mid-summer heat and humidity and often cramped living conditions created a community and encouraged people to congregate on the streets in the evening to catch a cool breeze. The custom called "Chen Liang 乘凉" is a typical part of the Shanghai lifestyle. Zhang recalls that while his neighbours and friends sat together chatting and telling stories, he would gaze at the sky for hours fixated by the clouds and stars, the universe and its vastness, and he formed the desire to be an astronomer or a scientist.⁴¹¹ Those childhood dreams later manifested themselves in his art and in his explorations of philosophy.

Zhang Jianjun came from a non-artistic family background. His parents belonged to an early generation of liberal-minded⁴¹² revolutionists and had worked in cultural organisations from the 1950s until they were purged during the Cultural Revolution.⁴¹³ Their rebellious disposition was passed on to Zhang, and later became evident in his artistic career. It was not until middle school that he met his first art teacher Li Zhiqin 李志勤. Li was a modernist and had studied in the early 1960s prior to the Cultural Revolution at the Nanjing University of the Arts, an institution that had strong links to some key figures in the early twentieth-century modernist movement, such as Cai Yuanpei, Liu Haisu, and Yan Wenliang.⁴¹⁴ Li's artworks had been influenced by his own teachers. While the Cultural Revolution was in progress socialist realism art and political propaganda dominated art practices in the entire country. Li took an enormous risk in those years in setting up a special art training studio outside of the school's art classes to teach modernist art practices. Zhang remembered

⁴¹⁰ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴¹¹ *ibid.*

⁴¹² See the definition of the term "liberal-minded" in Chapter 2, footnote 247.

⁴¹³ Under the "rehabilitation" policy after the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Jianjun's father returned to his position as a high-level official at the Shanghai Broadcasting Bureau and his mother took a position as a health and wellbeing officer at the official *Wenhui* newspaper in Shanghai.

⁴¹⁴ Two pioneers of modern art education in the early twentieth century, Cai Yuanpei and Liu Haisu, have been discussed in the Introduction. Yan Wenliang was slightly younger than Cai and Liu. After he founded the Suzhou Fine Art College in Suzhou (SFAC) in 1922, Yan went to France to study art in 1928 and returned to Suzhou in 1932 with almost ten thousand volumes on art and five hundred sculpture replicas. Yan was Li Zhiqin's art teacher at Nanjing University of the Arts in the early 1960s. More reading on SFAC can be found in English at <<http://en.nua.edu.cn/2573/list.htm>>.

some of those training sessions held during the summer when they had to “close the door and windows and curtains to hide” the artworks they had inside the studio: drawings from Li’s private collections and reproductions of classical European sculptures in plaster models such as David by Michelangelo, a copy of an ancient Roman bust of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (a philosopher and playwright), and so on.⁴¹⁵ Zhang continued studying with Li after he finished high school in 1972 and also took a job at a shipyard where his main work was to paint the outside surfaces of ships’ hulls. He later remembered the excitement he felt when he first saw at Li’s private home some art magazines with images of the Dutch painter Rembrandt’s paintings, which Li allowed only two students to borrow for a short period.⁴¹⁶ In 1975 Zhang went through the entry examination and was accepted into the STA in Shanghai that year to study art.

Despite the boom in art education in Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century, by the mid-1970s, there were only two higher education institutions that offered practical art courses and two professional training colleges. The two higher education institutions were the STA and the Shanghai Normal University (SNU 上海师范学院); the professional training colleges were the Shanghai Fine Art College (SFAC 上海市美术专科学校) and the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College (SACC 上海市工艺美术学校). The STA was founded in the mid-1940s and was the most prestigious place to study, for both performance and stage design and became a major multi-disciplinary art educational institution in Shanghai. The STA resumed its formal intake of performance students towards the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1975 and introduced a trial programme in fine art. Zhang was part of this first cohort in the newly-offered programme. Within the STA, the Art Department was combined with the Department of Stage Art/Set Design (舞台美术). There were several lecturers at STA such as Chen Junde⁴¹⁷ and Kong Boji⁴¹⁸ who were students of the earlier generation of modernists including Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian, and continued their personal ties throughout their art careers in Shanghai. Zhang acknowledges the influence Chen and Kong

⁴¹⁵ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴¹⁶ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁷ Chen Junde was a key figure in the Shanghai modernist art scene in the 1970s both during and after the Cultural Revolution. He was famous for his paintings in the impressionist style. He avoided political punishment by separating his art practice and private teaching at home from his teaching at the STA. He was the teacher of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, and Cai Guoqiang who are each discussed in the case studies of this thesis. (Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴¹⁸ Kong Boji 孔柏基, (b. 1932), graduated from Shanghai Zhonghua Professional Chinese School in 1948. He taught fine art at STA as a vice professor and dean of the Fine Art Department from 1954 to 1986. He moved to the US in 1986. He was heavily influenced by the early generation modernists in Shanghai. His major artistic achievement was to combine impressionist techniques with Eastern aesthetics that inspired him from the art in the Dunhuang Grottos in the late 1970s.

had on him at different stages of his studies and on his subsequent teaching career at the STA:

Besides the head teacher for our class, there were two older teachers who influenced me. Chen Junde 陈均德 from the Stage Art Department had been a student of Liu Haisu and his thinking and art style were so open and modern at that time. During this period, most people were influenced by the former Soviet Union (Socialist Realist Art) however, Chen played an important role in my artistic development during my student years.

The other person was Kong Boji 孔柏基. It was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution that he could provide us with a lot of information on traditional Chinese culture. As we were students learning Western painting, we had little interest in traditional Chinese literature or the old masters' paintings. They seemed irrelevant to us. But it was through Kong Boji that I became interested in traditional Chinese stone engravings and Buddhist art. The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and by 1977 there were many books on traditional Chinese and Western literature and philosophy released. We read a lot of books then and that is when I started to be interested in "Lao Zi 老子" and "Zhuang Zi 庄子." Whenever Kong and I met, we would have discussions on these topics. So that kind of influence was also very important to me.⁴¹⁹

Another important influence for Zhang at STA a few years later was the art lecturer Li Shan. Zhang's interaction with these three teachers reflects the local culture of Shanghai artists which allowed different generations to share knowledge and ideas about art, history and philosophy. The nature of their friendship focused largely around developing independent and critical thinking outside the mainstream and searching for new approaches in art.

Zhang's relationship with Li Shan strengthened after he graduated in 1978. Unlike Chen Junde and Kong Boji, the relationship between Zhang and Li was based not only on shared interests but also in providing mutual support in their individual experimental artistic pursuits and avant-garde art activities. At that time, China's political conditions were still unfavourable to artists such as Zhang and Li who found themselves under enormous pressure and who took great risks in pursuing their art outside the official framework. They persisted in pursuing their own ideas in their art expressions that challenged the status quo. Zhang and Li also influenced other young artists as I discuss later in this chapter.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ Zhang Jianjun, "Interview by Wen Zijian." English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁴²⁰ Zhang Jianjun introduced me to Li Shan in 1980. Through my association with Zhang, Li Shan and other artists, my own interests in art changed in the period 1984 to 1985.

During the Cultural Revolution library collections in universities and colleges across China were limited to providing art students with basic art information, Cultural Revolution propaganda, and materials on socialist realist-style art. Nevertheless, the library in the STA was of special significance for Zhang and others because of one person, Min Xiwen, who broke the rules to give young students a glimpse into a forbidden world of art from the West. In an interview in 2004, Zhang recounted how Min secretly showed him picture books of Western modernist art from impressionist art to fauvism.⁴²¹ Min had studied art under the early Chinese modernists Wu Dayu, Fang Ganmin and Cai Weilian at the National Hangzhou Art College in the mid-1930s. Min started teaching at the Stage Art Department of the STA in 1953. He was purged during the Anti-Rightist Movement in the late 1950s for his pursuits in modernist art and then worked in the library after he returned from a forced labour camp.⁴²²

Exploration and Experimentation

The revival of modernist art in Shanghai after the Cultural Revolution had a significant effect on the work produced by younger artists. For Zhang, this meant he could explore modernist forms and reject the official dictum of socialist realism art. It was because of the influence of modernism that he was considered a young talent during his study at STA. After his graduation in 1978, Zhang was appointed an art lecturer and taught a pilot class in preparation for the establishment of a new art academy in Shanghai that was temporarily located within the Art Department of the STA.⁴²³ When Zhang finished teaching the pilot course in 1980 the initiative to establish a new art academy fell through as the leading influential figure of this plan Lu Meng, an early generation artist and art administrator in the government, unfortunately had a stroke.⁴²⁴ From 1979 to 1980 while Zhang was waiting to

⁴²¹ Zhang Jianjun, "Interview by Wen Zijian."

⁴²² Min Xiwen 闵希文 was in the same cohort of students along with Dong Xiwen 董希文, Zhao Wuji 赵无极 and Zhu Dequn 朱德群, who had all studied under teachers returning to Shanghai from France in the 1920s such as Wu Dayu 吴大羽, Fang Ganmin 方干民 and Cai Weilian 蔡威廉. A concise historical information on this generation of artists can be viewed online: <<http://baike.baidu.com/view/1080600.htm>; <http://auction.artron.net/showpic.php?ArtCode=art66080037>>, viewed 30 November 2012.

⁴²³ There was a plan from the Shanghai Artists Association to establish an art academy in Shanghai. Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴²⁴ Lu Meng 吕蒙 was part of the early revolutionary artists who had participated in the Chinese Left-Wing Woodcut Movement led by Lu Xun in the early twentieth century. He became an art administrator after 1949 and held several important posts including as the head of several publishing houses in Shanghai, and the Shanghai Artists Association. As Zhang Jianjun stated in our interview "he was instrumental in the plan to establish a Shanghai Art Academy." Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

be assigned to his next position,⁴²⁵ the images in his art represented changes in the direction of his artistic journey. Over this short time, his work was diverse from colourful post-impressionist or expressionist styles, such as the oil paintings *Force – Velocity* (1979) (《力与速度》), *A girl under the shade of a tree* (1980) (《树阴下的少女》) (Figure 52.), and *Fish series* (1980) (《鱼系列》) (Figure 53.), to an exploration of the Chinese oracle bone scripts, such as *House and Bird* (1980) (《房子和鸟》), and to monotone or black-and-white abstract forms like *Pathetique* (1980) (《悲怆》). His key work *Force – Velocity* earned him the nickname of “fauve Zhang” within the STA and among a small circle of young artists. *Force - Velocity* was an unusually large oil painting (300cm x 100cm) at that time and the artistic expression showed the influence of fauvism. In this painting, the figure of an athlete rowing is blurred into a composition of brightly contrasting colours in impasto paints executed with bold and expressive brush strokes. This artwork was deemed to be in a modernist style and was immediately rejected by the selection committee when Zhang



Figure 52. Zhang Jianjun, *A Girl under the Shade of a Tree* 《树阴下的少女》, 1980.
Oil on canvas, 138 x 165 cm.

⁴²⁵ Under the CCP regime, most artists were assigned by the government to a work unit (“danwei”), which could be organisations, factories or an educational institution. These assignments might not relate to art. Independent and professional artists were not accepted by the authorities and were not recognised in the system until the 1990s under the Party’s economic reform policy.



Figure 53. Zhang Jianjun, Fish series 《鱼系列》, 1980. Oil on canvas.

submitted it for the annual art exhibition at the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery (later the Shanghai Art Museum) organised by the Shanghai Artists Association in 1979. Following considerable debate among the committee members, Zhang's painting just passed the censorship board and was included in this exhibition.⁴²⁶

By 1980, Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening-up" policy that ushered in political and economic reforms in China had gained momentum, and the phenomenon of Cultural Fever became widespread.⁴²⁷ At the beginning of the 1980s, translated Western modern literature and philosophical theories became accessible; however, information on the discourses of Western contemporary art remained scarce. Zhang read volumes of Western philosophical theories from Kant and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Sartre within a short period of time.⁴²⁸ He had widened his reading list and interests and followed the vibrant debates that were taking place in China about social and cultural history, sometimes extending to the sciences. These new publications brought with them new ideas including on modern science, for example, the China-published series *Towards the Future* (《走向未来》), which was stimulating and thought provoking.⁴²⁹ Information on new releases of interesting books and journals were regularly exchanged and shared among friends.

⁴²⁶ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴²⁷ See Introduction for more detail on Cultural Fever.

⁴²⁸ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008). In a period from 1979 to 1982, Zhang read many books on Western philosophy translated into Chinese including; Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Henri-Louis Bergson, and Jürgen Habermas, etc.

⁴²⁹ See Jin Guantao, ed., *Towards the Future Series* (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1983). 《走向未来》, 四川人民出版社, 1983. Originally planned for one hundred editions, the first book in the series was

This period was a turning point in Zhang Jianjun's artistic development. His practice and his art underwent a significant transformation. Influenced by his teacher and then colleague Kong Boji, they travelled together to visit the significant Buddhist Grottos in search of artistic inspirations in 1978 and 1979.⁴³⁰ Their first journey was to the Longmen Grotto (龙门石窟) (493AD) (Henan 河南 province) and to the Yongle Palace Grotto (1247AD) (永乐宫石窟) (Shanxi 山西 province) in 1978, and then to the Dunhuang Grottos (366 AD) (敦煌石窟) (Gansu 甘肃 province) in 1979. In my interview with Zhang, he recalled that his visit to the Longmen and Yongle Grottos had turned his attention towards traditional Chinese art and culture. He explained that at that time he was mentally in tune with traditional art and technically prepared to explore new artistic expressions. Zhang described his visit to the Dunhuang Grottos as having a profound effect on his art. Situated in remote north-west China, along the old Silk Road, the grottos, as he later said, caused in him a unique sensation. The spiritual narratives in two-dimensional flat images had an impact on the artist who had been trained in Western three-dimensional visual representational concepts. (Figure 54.) The art in the grottos appeared, he has said, to communicate with the viewer on a spiritual level rather than directly representing a tangible reality. He described the impact on him as a strong force enabling him to reach his inner world.⁴³¹ In the Dunhuang grottos he and Kong



Figure 54. Dunhuang Grotto mural image.

published in 1983 and stopped at the 74th edition in 1988 during the Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalisation. Any materials of this nature were suppressed after the June Fourth Incident and the students' demonstration in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The series contains broad topics from the natural sciences to the social sciences, including essays from leading Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s as well as translations of Western literature, which reflected the most advanced thinking in China's ideological emancipation of the time. It was hugely popular and influential through the 1980s.

⁴³⁰ According to Zhang, Kong studied Buddhist imagery and art at the time. Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴³¹ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

painted day and night for a month, trying to understand the ancient art, and exploring the different techniques and styles represented in the frescos and sculptures, responding with their own interpretations of what they saw. (Figure 55.)



Figure 55. Zhang Jianjun, *Blue Figure, Dunhuang Grotto* 《蓝色人物，敦煌石窟》，1979.
Oil on rice paper, 72 x 72 cm.

Zhang has spoken of his struggle after returning from Dunhuang to reconcile how he had viewed art in the past and the stark difference from what he had experienced in the grottos. He found that the conditions for his creativity had changed and he could no longer continue to paint in the same way as in the past. He underwent a period of disillusionment with his art practice. At the same time he turned to books on traditional Chinese and Indian philosophy, such as the writings of Laozi “Book of Change” and the Sanskrit texts “Upanishads.”⁴³² He was consciously searching for “a kind of feeling”, and as he described it, “neither from an academic or philosopher’s view, nor by illustrations or diagrams, could it be explained.”⁴³³ His interest in philosophy stemmed from his search for personal artistic inspiration and an emotional response rather than scholarly or academic study, although it also reflected a metaphysical and conceptual process. The art Zhang produced during the period from 1979 to 1982 displayed the influences from his readings. The impact of his visits

⁴³² The Chinese term for Upanishads is Aoyishu 奥义书.

⁴³³ Zhang Jianjun, “Interview by Wen Zijian.”

to the grottos helped him escape from the “dialectics of Western philosophical theories.”⁴³⁴ Zhang’s work started to show his conscious search for an artistic expression drawn from traditional Chinese culture what he called the “Eastern spirit” (东方精神).⁴³⁵ This is seen in a group of experimental works based on the oracle bone scripts from the *Yinxu* ancient site (殷墟 1250-1192 BCE), for example *House and Bird* (1979). (Figure 56.) The artist later saw this group of works as a transition “using the Western illustrative form as a carrier for the ‘Eastern spirit’.”⁴³⁶



Figure 56. Zhang Jianjun, *House and Bird* 《房子和鸟》, 1979.
Oil on canvas.

In 1980 Zhang produced a work that was vastly different from his other painting at the time, adopting an abstract style for a large-scale oil painting. The work *Pathétique* was his first attempt at abstraction, inspired from trying to interpret Tchaikovsky’s music. (Figure 57.) Zhang produced most of his works at his studio in the apartment he shared with his parents.⁴³⁷ Wu Liang 吴亮, a self-taught essayist and critic, closely followed Zhang Jianjun’s artistic path. When he visited Zhang’s home/studio in 1981 he said that he was astounded by what he saw. In the middle of the small room stood a large black and white painting - *Pathétique*. Wu has said he felt “repression and unrestrained power bursting and radiating

⁴³⁴ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴³⁵ In this thesis, I define the “Eastern spirit” in contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s as an artistic expression that includes traditional Chinese philosophy. The conscious searching for an artistic expression drawn from traditional Chinese culture was sought not only by Zhang, but also by other Shanghai avant-garde artists in the early 1980s. This is explained further in the following chapters, for example, see the discussion in the beginning of the Chapter 5.

⁴³⁶ *ibid.*

⁴³⁷ See footnote 455 about Zhang’s studio.



Figure 57. Zhang Jianjun, *Pathetique* 《悲怆》, 1979.
Oil on canvas, 140 x 105 cm.

from the centre [of the painting] to the surrounding area,” which he further described as “the direct externalization of uncontrolled emotion” and an artwork that recorded a process of “a time-based transmission of emotions compressed into a two dimensional flat surface.”⁴³⁸ Later that year, Wu and Zhang visited the first American modern art exhibition in the Shanghai Museum, *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, where they discovered the work of Franz Kline, *Probst I* (1973) noting how it resembled *Pathetique*.⁴³⁹ They realised that human emotions and expressions were often similar, regardless of cultural differences and distance. As China still had restrictions on what art could be shown publicly, *Pathetique* had no exposure to the public up to that time. Zhang’s early experimentation with abstraction was soon followed by works demonstrating a variety of new sources of inspiration.

Zhang’s reading of works of philosophy was ultimately to become a search for “a kind of feeling,” triggered by a word, a phrase or the reading process itself, that would impact on

⁴³⁸ Wu Liang, “Sunset Reappearing: Recollections of my friend Jianjun and his paintings,” *Writer Magazine* (Changchun: Jilin Province Writers Association, 1988), p.6. The original Chinese text: “既压抑又奔放的由中心向四周放射与冲决的力量;” “狂躁心态的直接外化;” “把一种需要在时间中传递的情绪压缩到一个平面的二维空间里。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁴³⁹ See in Wu Liang, “Sunset Reappearing: Recollections of my friend Jianjun and his paintings,” p.6. Also see a detailed discussion of the exhibition *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* in Chapter 1.

how he perceived the world. During this intellectual process, he has said he could sense a change in how he viewed his environment. For example, when he looked at an object, he indicated he could no longer relate to it or interpret it as a subjective reality. He started to reflect deeply on the relationships between objects and how they related to time and space.⁴⁴⁰

An interest in Kant's noumena theory and in materials in art making gradually emerged in his experimental practice.⁴⁴¹ Zhang's epiphany came while browsing through the "Flower and Bird Market" nearby his studio - a daily ritual to observe nature and to maintain his large fish tank at home. He had now found in natural materials the means to express his thinking process and personal feelings and emotions.⁴⁴² He started to collect and experiment with the rocks and cobblestones, dry branches, sand and shards of pottery, together with an adhesive medium and oil paints to explore new directions. His reading and reflections, together with his childhood interest with the universe, led to the formation of new concepts and expressions in his art. The works he produced in 1981 and 1982 — for example, *Creek* (1981) and *Eternal Dialogue* 《永恒的对话》 (1982) (Figures 58, 59.) — reflected this

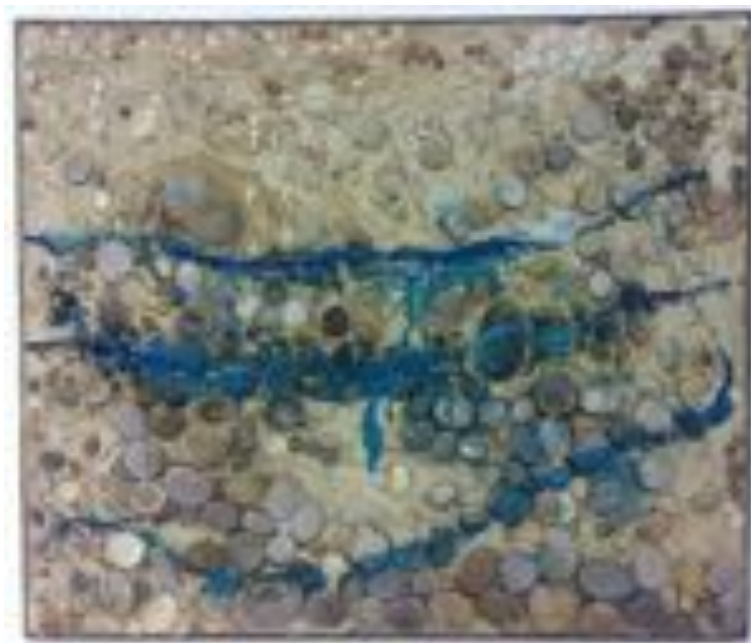


Figure 58. Zhang Jianjun, *Creek* 《溪》, 1980. Cobblestones, sand and oil colour on canvas, 60 x 70cm.

⁴⁴⁰ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴⁴¹ I discussed Zhang's reading of Western philosophy earlier in this chapter. The Oxford dictionary defines "nomenon/noumena" as: "(in Kantian philosophy) a thing as it is in itself, as distinct from a thing as it is knowable by the senses through phenomenal attributes." Zhang said during my interview in 2008 that his interest was in the basic concept of the nomenon not in the different views and debates from Kant, Schopenhauer and others on the theory.

⁴⁴² Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).



Figure 59. Zhang Jianjun, *Eternal Dialogue* 《永恒的对话》, 1982. Rocks, cobblestones, broken pottery, sand, plaster and oil colour on canvas, 67 x 92 cm.

transitional and early experimental period. These paintings were mostly in black and white oil paint and incorporated sand, stone and plaster on canvas. The images were abstract combinations of lines, shapes, colours, random objects, natural materials and scientific symbols evoking a sense of harmony and beauty. In examining this critical period of his work, I argue that *Eternal Dialogue* represents a milestone in Zhang's art.⁴⁴³ After periods of intense intellectual reading, disillusionment, and then further explorations, Zhang found a new artistic language. His use of a rectangular shape, with sections of the canvas left uncovered forming subtle boundaries of different spaces inside the rectangle, created solid and earthy visual references. By using a group of irregularly shaped natural coloured rocks and earthenware debris glued to the canvas, I interpret Zhang's intention as being to create an aerial view of the earth. In my view the work conveys calmness and a sense of contemplation and of communication between nature and humans in both physical and spiritual terms. Wu Liang recorded a similar reaction when he first saw this painting:

I'll never forget the excitement the first time I saw this painting. After the excitement, then, the peace is restored. The painting conveys the sense of human longing and perplexity towards the infinite space, and time not only extends into the future but can also be retrospective to the past — time is frozen under the gaze of the human spirit. It is transcended. The appearance of human spirit in the universe

⁴⁴³ The title of *Eternal Dialogue* is significant because the artist's future artistic journey showed a continuing search for elements that reflected similar themes.

symbolises the beginning of the dialogue. We don't know when this dialogue begins or when it ends.⁴⁴⁴

Following Zhang's further exploration of materials, between 1982 and 1983 he produced a group of mixed-media paintings, including *Time • Space* 《时间•空间》, *Contraction & Expansion* 《聚•散》, *Have/Existence series No. 44*, 《“有” 系列 No.44》, *Heat - Information from Inner Human* 《热能 — 来自人类内部的信息》. (Figures 60, 61.) As his experimentation continued, the artworks increasingly began to demonstrate an explosive and deconstructive energy that arose from the conflicting relationships between the natural materials, broken glass and mirrors, and painted marks. Zhang's works during this period also reflect his continued reading of Western and Eastern philosophical texts and books about nature and science. Using mixed materials on the canvas to create an artistic image, and the challenge to the conventional concept of a painting, I argue, was unprecedented in art practice in China at the time and marked a significant change in the aesthetics of painting in contemporary Chinese art.⁴⁴⁵



Figure 60. Zhang Jianjun, *Time-Space* 《时间·空间》, 1982. Cobblestones, sand, plaster and oil colour on canvas, 200 x 450 x 10 cm.

⁴⁴⁴ Wu Liang, "Human's Peaceful Thinking – reading of the Eternal Dialogue" (人类的静思—读《永恒的对 话》), Wenhui Newspaper, (Shanghai): 1985. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁴⁴⁵ As well as my personal observations, my findings based on research in publications on Chinese modern and contemporary art history are evidence that there is no record of such art practice in paintings in China before 1981 when Zhang Jianjun created his works. Zhang has also claimed that he did not have any prior knowledge or information on Western art with the use of mixed media during the creation and experimentation of his own mixed-media oil paintings. Also see discussion and Zhang's quote under the subheading "International Influences and Interactions" later in this chapter.



Figure 61. Zhang Jianjun, *Have/Existence series No. 44*, 《“有”系列 No.44》, 1983.
Sand, stone, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm.

From Political Censorship to the First Prize Award

Zhang Jianjun's oil painting *Force-Velocity* marginally passed the censorship for entry into a major art show in the Shanghai Art Museum in 1979. The following years of experimental practice in his art and the new artistic language which he had developed were considered by officials as infected by bourgeois thought and therefore his works were censored and not able to be shown in public exhibitions.⁴⁴⁶ From 1980 to 1985, Zhang continued to work alone and tried to stay under the radar of government censorship. The Party launched the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in October 1983 to curb ideas influenced by Western cultural values, particularly the indulgence of individualism in the cultural sphere which some believed had occurred since the introduction of economic reforms.⁴⁴⁷ Zhang became a target of this political campaign because of his artworks which featured in the unofficial exhibition, though open to the public, *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage of 1983* that he and other artists, mostly associated with the STA, organised.⁴⁴⁸ Held at the staff club of Fudan University in early September 1983 the

⁴⁴⁶ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴⁴⁷ See my discussion of the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in Chapter 2. For an in-depth discussion on the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign see also Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, pp.233-237.

⁴⁴⁸ It is also known as the *Ten Persons Art Exhibition* 拾人画展. The ten artists were Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Dai Hengyang 戴恒阳, Wang Bangxiong 王邦雄, Gao Jing 高进, Yu Xiaofu 俞晓夫, Cha Guojun 查国钧, Leng Hong

exhibition had the support of intellectuals in the University. The exhibition showed recent works of the artists with mixed styles of art ranging from impressionism to abstraction and mixed media paintings. Zhang showed five mixed media abstract works including *Contraction & Expansion* and *Eternal Dialogue*. The exhibition lasted only a day and a half before the University had to close it under political pressure. Zhang and others were criticized by government officials in an article published in *Liberation Daily* 解放日报, a major Shanghai newspaper. Titled “Abstract Paintings, new forms and the national condition” (抽象画, 新形式与国情), the article referred to Zhang’s artworks and criticised them as “grotesque” and “blindly pursuing Western abstract art” and stated they were “incomprehensible to the public.” Zhang was identified as the prime mover behind the exhibition and, as a result, was blacklisted during the campaign in the following months. He was now considered in the category of those “severely affected” by the “Western bourgeois spiritual pollutions.”⁴⁴⁹ As punishment, Zhang lost his professional position and from 1983 to 1984 he was reassigned to the duty of collecting entry tickets at the SAM’s back entrance.

The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was short-lived. It was stopped in early 1984 by concerned politicians within the Communist Party which led to a more relaxed political environment over the following years. Influenced by his readings in Western and Eastern philosophies, Zhang continued his experimental works and moved into a new phase of his art which saw him inspired by the study of ontology and Daoism (Taoism).⁴⁵⁰ This process of enquiry contained challenging elements of the known and the unknown. The known element was Zhang’s experiences of various states of existence, particularly the political and cultural conditions at the time when the art produced was dominated by socialist realism and Cultural Revolution propaganda. The unknown element was his investigations into traditional (Chinese) and new (Western) knowledge and ideas within the metaphysical sphere to obtain what he called “feelings,” as a counterbalance to the known existences. In this process of balance and counterbalance, the element of the unknown posed challenges to elements of the known. In the context of art, the unknown inspired new artistic approaches that challenged the aesthetic values of the known. Such a metaphysical thinking

冷宏, Zhou Jiahua 周加华, and Fang Fang 方芳. Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008). See more discussion on this exhibition in Chapter 1 under the subheading “Critical Early Unofficial Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s.”

⁴⁴⁹ See Huang Ke, “Abstract Paintings, new forms and the national condition”, *Liberation Daily* (06 December 1983): p.4 and in Deng Ming, ed. *A Collection of Documentations on Experimental Works*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Liu Haisu Art Museum, 2004), pp.8-10.

⁴⁵⁰ Ontology is a branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being. Daoism (Taoism) is based on the writings of Laozi advocating humility and religious piety. (See online Oxford Dictionary <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/taoism>>, <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ontology>>, viewed 16 April 2019.)

process led him to a new artistic language and form of expression in abstraction that challenged the official art of the time. Zhang believed that, as a visual artist, his art rather than written words and texts should express such a process. Therefore, he refused to express his ideas in written form and text during the 1980s.⁴⁵¹

If *Eternal Dialogue* represented an important milestone in his art, the series of paintings titled “Have/Existence” (有) produced from 1983 onwards were clearly abstract and conceptual. Wu Liang, who had a high opinion of the series, made the following comments:

[...] The oil painting series ‘Have/Existence’ are the most tranquil and peaceful representation of Jianjun’s inner world. Earlier [in this series], when he expresses the mysterious existence of cosmic space and disorder, and the individual's incomprehensible confusion [about existence], the theme of ‘cosmos and individual’ constantly appears with a sense of anxiety and emotion that is either controlling or suppressing his struggles.⁴⁵²

Wu pointed out the source of inspiration of this concept of “existence” “originated from the East” and was endowed with the important philosophical attributes of “order and transcendence.” He then continued:

Certainly, Jianjun didn’t completely abandon his previous painting practice. He has always tried to integrate the individual into the grandness of human thoughts. As a matter of fact, regardless of the East or the West, painting is supposed to belong to all human beings. [...] Is there a thing that can be called universal thinking? Are human beings at the centre of the universe as they think they are? The ‘Have/Existence’ series is challenging such naïve thoughts, while trying to establish a visible pattern of the universe to find order among the disorderly, man’s self-confidence and doubt are enhanced at the same time.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai, 2004, 2008).

⁴⁵² Wu, ‘Sunset Reappearing: Recollections of my friend Jianjun and his paintings’, p.8. The original Chinese text: “被命名为《有》的一系列油画，是健君迄今为止最为宁和的精神体现。在早些时候，他试图表达宇宙空间和混沌无序以及个人对这一神秘存在的莫可名状的困惑时，这一‘宇宙与个人’的主题总是反复出现一种焦灼感，情绪始终处于不断的挣扎和制服挣扎的控制中。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁴⁵³ *ibid.* The original Chinese text: “当然，健君并没有完全离开他早些年绘画道路。他总是力图把个人融汇于滚滚的人类思维的洪流中。事实上，不管是东方还是西方，绘画应当是属于整个人类的 有没有一种宇宙思维呢？人是否象他自以为是的那样处于宇宙中心呢？健君的这一系列题名为《有》的油画正在动摇这种天真的想法。在试图建立一个宇宙的有形模式的同时，在从混沌中发现有序的同时，其实人的自信和疑惑一起增强了。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

I assert that Wu's comment linking Zhang's painting to humanity is perceptive and as it draws from his conversations with Zhang during many studio visits, he has a deep understanding of Zhang's thinking processes. According to Zhang, Wu helped to coin the title for this series of paintings.⁴⁵⁴ Zhang's intellectual and philosophical contemplations in the 1980s derived from his long-standing fascination with space, time and movement, and his search for new aesthetic vocabularies. In the mid-1980s, he had an increasing interest in analysing time and space and introduced elements into his works that existed beyond the canvas. The *Have/Existence* series comprising over 70 pieces produced throughout the 1980s best illustrates this process. For example, in the painting *No. 70* produced in 1985, the abstract image on canvas was constructed in materials and techniques similar to other mixed media works discussed earlier in this chapter. (Figure 62.) In *No 70* Zhang used a hemp rope attached to the top of the canvas to hang a rock wrapped in Chinese rice paper – like a pendulum — to convey a sense of instability and movement in space and time. The



Figure 62. Zhang Jianjun, *Have/Existence series No. 70*, 《“有” 系列 No.70》, 1983.
Ink, rice paper, sand, stone, wood, oil on canvas, 120 x 110 x 8 cm.

⁴⁵⁴ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai, 2004, 2008).

visual effect creates an aerial view of the earth that brings a sense of space between the elements and materials on the canvas, and between the viewer and the image. This experiment of an object attached to the canvas was a transition to a three-dimensional installation form in his art that was an important step to create spatial relationships. The three-dimensional object used in some artworks emphasised its own existence in relation to the background or other elements in the work. Another work in the *Have/Existence* series titled *Nature No.57* and produced in 1989, is a further example of Zhang's move towards the form of installation art. (Figure 63.) The three-dimensional aspect in Zhang's work, I consider was still executed under the idea of painting as a two-dimensional mode of expression. The transformation from two-dimensional art to three-dimensional installation illustrates the artist's thinking processes and his search for a new means of visual communication. As noted earlier, by the mid-1980s the political environment had relaxed and abstract art was no longer regarded as a direct threat to the political regime. This meant Zhang could now show his works in public, albeit mainly in Shanghai. From 1990, Zhang's art practice departed from canvas-based paintings and entered a multi-dimensional installation art.



Figure 63. Zhang Jianjun, *Have/Existence series No. 57*, 《“有” 系列 No.57》, 1984.
Ink, rice paper, wood, oil on canvas, 158 x 145 x 3 cm.

During the period from the mid-1980s when the excitement and the challenges in the conceptualisation of earlier works became for him an established artistic language, he started to look for new directions to continue his artistic journey. While still working on his abstract series *Have/Existence*, he expanded the focus of his enquiries from relationships in the universe to humanity and produced several large-scale figurative paintings that featured symbolic and surrealistic images exploring the relationships between humans, space and time. *Human Beings and Their Clock*, a major work produced in 1985, was admitted into the *First Shanghai Young Artists' Art Exhibition* and won the First Prize in 1986.⁴⁵⁵ (Figure 64.) In this work Zhang used black and white colours painted in oil on a large linen canvas (220 x 340 centimetres) significantly larger than *Force-Velocity* (1979) and still unusual in China in



Figure 64. Zhang Jianjun, *Human Beings and Their Clock* 《人类与他们的钟》, 1985. Oil on canvas, 220 x 340 cm.

⁴⁵⁵ The *First Shanghai Young Artists' Art Exhibition* was organised by the Shanghai Youth Literature and Art Alliance (上海青年文学艺术联合会), the Shanghai Youth Art Association (上海青年美术会), the Shanghai Art and Design Company (上海美术设计公司) and (Shanghai Art Creative Centre 上海艺术创作中心). The exhibition consisted of 205 exhibits from some 200 artists aged under forty. The exhibition was shown in two stages at the Shanghai Art Museum from 19-28 April 1986. (See in Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.211); *Meishu* 《美术》, 1986 (7) : 2, 38-39, 40-42, 59. The exhibition was initiated by artists affiliated with the Shanghai Normal University and the STA, as well as artists Yu Xiaofu, Zhang Jianjun, Hu Zhirong, Zhou Gang, Zhou Jun, Liu Yaping, Shen Haopeng, and Liu Jian, with the purpose of forming a young artists' association. Key figures from official organisations including Fang Zengxian (SAM), He Zhengzhi and Zhu Guorong (Shanghai Artists Association) provided strong support, without which it would not have been possible to establish the Shanghai Youth Artists Association. Zhang Jianjun, Interview with Lansheng Zhang, 10 August 2018.

the mid 1980s.⁴⁵⁶ The main features of the painting consisted of a mushroom-like symbolic clock rising from the horizon, creating an illusion of earth and sky, and five human figures of different races and ages in various poses. Together, these features suggested a moment in a long human history and the fundamental relationship between humans, space and time is addressed. In this painting, Zhang expressed his respect for human wisdom represented by the symbolic clock and for human endurance by depicting people constrained by a vast and overwhelming environment. This painting had a significant visual impact on the viewer and became a major success in the exhibition. I argue that the movement between the figurative and the abstract in Zhang's work underlines his key concerns of time and space in relation to the human condition.

The painting was selected for the cover page of the major national art magazine *Meishu* (7th edition 1986), with Gao Minglu as editor. This edition reported largely on the new contemporary art activities and works produced in China between 1985 and 1986 later termed as the "'85 Movement" by Gao and his co-authors in their book.⁴⁵⁷ In this book, Zhang's abstract paintings were described as reflecting "a religious meditation about existence, humanity and the universe" and the ability to "grasp the transcendental experience and knowledge in art." They went further to state: "The reflection in pursuit of ontology in his works presented a kind of Eastern form of apprehension and sentiment, which lifted him up in a higher level rather than being an ordinary oil painter."⁴⁵⁸ In a recent exhibition catalogue, Gao refers to *Human Beings and Their Clock* as a powerful influence on a whole generation of artists.⁴⁵⁹ However, despite such high praise and recognition, Zhang's painting was not included in Wu Hung's important publication *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*.⁴⁶⁰

After producing some variations on this painting, Zhang continued to concentrate on the *Have/Existence* series in the late 1980s. Between the *Have/Existence* series and the *Human Beings with Their Clock* painting, he also produced the *Misty Rain* series based on his memory of southern China's water town landscapes. (Figures 65.) Although the subject

⁴⁵⁶ Most artists in Shanghai did not have large studio spaces and artists were largely producing art in their homes with limited space. Zhang was fortunate to have access to a large studio space within SAM's storage facility after he was reassigned to the SAM in 1982. Lansheng Zhang, Interview with Zhang Jianjun, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2008).

⁴⁵⁷ Gao Minglu, et al., '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde.

⁴⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.218. The original Chinese phrases: "对于存在、对于人与宇宙作宗教式的冥想;" "在艺术中作一种超验的、超知识的把握;" "他穷追存在本体的一系列作品, 显出一种东方式的把握和感悟, 这使得他能高出一般的油画家一筹。" Gao and his co-authors in using the term "ontology" have recognised the philosophical concept he had used. English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁴⁵⁹ Gao Minglu, "Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese "Abstraction," exh cat. (Shanghai, 2007).

⁴⁶⁰ See a detailed discussion in Chapter 1.



Figure 65. Zhang Jianjun, *Misty Rain series* 《雨蒙蒙》, 1985. Ink, rice paper, oil on canvas 66 x 91 cm.

matter in this series was conventional, his use of collage with ink and rice paper on canvas and oil paint was new to art production in China. Zhang's continued pursuit of the "Eastern spirit" was evident in his art at that time.⁴⁶¹ From 1985 his works were once again accepted in official art exhibitions (he had last participated in official art exhibitions in 1979). The *Misty Rain* series was first shown and won an award in the 1985 official Annual Art Exhibition in Shanghai. The year 1986 was Zhang's busiest exhibition programme ever with five shows in a year. These major exhibitions included the inaugural *SAM's New Building Completion Exhibition*, the *First Shanghai Young Artists' Art Exhibition*, and the *Inaugural Sea Level Art Exhibition Shanghai*. Zhang had his first solo exhibition in 1987 in the experimental art space in the Shanghai Art Museum.⁴⁶²

Individualist Character and Interactions with Other Avant-Garde Artists

Zhang's art practice needs to be understood within the parameters of the '85 Movement (also referred to as the '85 Art New Wave) and the Movement's base in the notion of collectivism, which was in contrast to his own staunch belief in individualism.⁴⁶³ In previous chapters, I have argued that the spirit of individualism was fundamental to the avant-garde artists in Shanghai. This is especially evident in the 1985-1986 period, as avant-

⁴⁶¹ See in this chapter footnote 434 for the definition of the "Eastern spirit" and in relation to other artists in the thesis.

⁴⁶² Zhang Jianjun, "Biography," in exh cat. *Zhang Jianjun* (Shanghai: Shanghai Jinxiu Literary Publishing House, 2012), p.200.

⁴⁶³ See earlier discussion on the '85 Art New Wave in Chapter 1 under the subheading of "National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s," and discussions related to collectivism in the Introduction and in Chapter 1.

garde art became widespread in China. Zhang's decision to distance himself from collective art movements amplified his commitment to individualism. This decision needs to be examined in the context of the political culture in the 1980s. Artists' groups and their collective actions or movements began to emerge in Beijing and other major cities in 1985. Enthusiastic young artists and art critics worked side by side, generating a vibrant avant-garde art scene. The '85 New Wave was driven by a clear social and artistic agenda. Wu Hung has noted that as it attacked official ideology and art policies, "its advocates tried hard to galvanise avant-garde artists into a unified front and to develop contemporary art into an organised 'movement.'"⁴⁶⁴ This concept of movements, known as *yundong*, had characterised the CCP's various political campaigns and remained "a central element of social life and continued to control people's thinking even after the Cultural Revolution was over."⁴⁶⁵ In the publication *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (2010), Wu Hung noted: "As it continued to develop in 1986 and 1987, it also produced internal opposition: some avant-garde artists and critics made an increasing effort to free artistic creation from collective activities motivated by sociopolitical goals."⁴⁶⁶ Wu commented further that "some individual artists and small cooperatives" were pursuing their art projects with "a more specific orientation" so as "to abandon a grand sociopolitical vision and to relocate the meaning of art in the creative process and experience."⁴⁶⁷ Wu Hung did not name the critics but discussed a number of artists who were graduates of CAFA in Beijing and CAA in Hangzhou in his important publication, but neglected to mention in his analysis the artists from Shanghai, including Zhang Jianjun and Chen Zhen.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁴ Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, p.99.

⁴⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁸ *ibid.* See also previous discussion on this issue in Chapter 1, under the subheading "National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s." Many scholarly discussions and writings on the '85 Art New Wave movement have been published in recent years, both in China and internationally, for example, see Zhu Qi, "End the Myth of the '85 Art New Wave," ("85 美术新潮的神话终结") in *Arts Criticism* 12 (2007):15-18; Yang Wei, "Is There Any Value in the '85'?" ("有没有一个 '85 '价值' ") in *Great Art* 2 (2007):35-35; Wang Nanming, "The academic nature of curators: Gao Minglu and Li Xianting," (2007) ("策划人的学术性: 高铭潞与栗宪庭"), at the *Chinese Art Critics* website < http://www.ysppj.com/shownews.asp?news_id=7284&page=1>, viewed 16 April 2019; Wang Lin, "Southwest China: Phenomena and State since '85 - Southwest Contemporary Art Exhibition 1985-2007," ("85 以来现象与状态系列展 从西南出发—西南当代艺术展 1985-2007") in *Great Art* 1 (2007):92-93; Huang Zhuan, "85 New Wave Art" as a Movement of Thought History," ("作为思想史运动的'85 新潮美术") in *Literature and Art Studies* 6 (2008):102-109; Peggy Wang, "Art Critics as Middlemen: Navigating State and Market in Contemporary Chinese Art, 1980s-1990s," *Art Journal*, vol.72 no.1 (Spring 2013): 6-19; Paul Gladston, "Deconstructing Gao Minglu: critical reflections on contemporaneity and associated exceptionalism readings of contemporary Chinese art," in *Journal of Art Historiography* no.10 (June 2014); Peng De, "Peng De: the New Wave Art theory," ("彭德: 新潮美术论") in *Art Contemporary* 3 (2015); Qin Yunjia, "An interview with Shui Tianzhong: Art research requires historical vision and humanistic feelings," ("专访水天中: 美术研究需要历史眼光与人文情怀") in *Art Observation* 11 (2018): 29-33.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the “studio discourse” in Shanghai during the 1980s where only a few local critics were writing about contemporary art. It was Wu Liang who was the earliest and most regular visitor to Zhang’s studio.⁴⁶⁹ Many art historians and critics have quoted Wu’s writings on the Shanghai contemporary art scene, and have relied on his early eyewitness accounts of Zhang’s artistic development in the early 1980s. The most quoted of Wu’s writings was the essay “Sunset Reappearance: recollections of my friend Jianjun and his art” that was written in 1987 and published in the literary journal *Writer* 《作家》 in 1988.⁴⁷⁰ In his eloquent writing style, Wu Liang provides the reader with a glimpse of the conditions of the early 1980s and the effect on young artists who struggled to break away from mainstream art and develop their own artistic direction. From 1949 expressions of personal thoughts and feelings outside of the CCP’s ideology had been suppressed and during the Cultural Revolution were fully prohibited. Wu Liang’s visits to Zhang’s studio enabled him to record crucial details and to interpret his art and the intellectual approach in the artworks because, as a young writer, he was very interested in the creative processes in contemporary art. In Wu’s essay, the influence of both Eastern and Western philosophies, together with the artist’s aspiration to acquire new knowledge, were vividly described to portray, not only Zhang’s intellectual approach, but also those of a whole generation of artists.⁴⁷¹ In this thesis, I attest that the conscious search by a number of avant-garde artists in Shanghai for new artistic languages drawn from historical and traditional art and philosophy was critical in the development of a nascent contemporary Chinese art. In his analyses, Wu Liang states explicitly that for Zhang Jianjun, as for other artists, the process was often about searching for inspiration, not for answers.⁴⁷² However, in my view, Wu Liang’s analysis does not go further and investigate Zhang’s experimental art practice itself, which could be considered as the artist’s primary form of expression or statement of his ideas. This consideration was circumscribed by the specificities of the time and socio-political conditions. From this point of view, the content of the art could be seen as secondary. The form of experimental practice itself directly challenged the official and academic modes of art production in the early 1980s. This is of fundamental importance in evaluating and contextualising the avant-garde art of the 1980s in China. In the previous

⁴⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁰ This essay was based on his earlier article titled “Human Meditation: Reading the *Eternal Dialogue*” “人类的静思 – 读《永恒的对话》” that Wu published it in the local Wenhui newspaper (文汇报) in 1985.

⁴⁷¹ See in Wu Liang, “Sunset Reappearing: Recollections of my friend Jianjun and his art,” in *Writer* (1988): 4-10.

⁴⁷² Wu Liang, “Sunset Reappearing: Recollections of my friend Jianjun and his paintings,” p.6. In this article, Wu Liang commented: “Jianjun as an artist realised that Eastern philosophies might bring to his art new ideas based only [on his experiences. [...]] And his reading was often for seeking inspirations rather than looking for reasons.” The original Chinese text: “[...] 健君幸好是个画家，它能觉悟到东方哲学对他的艺术带来的只是体验上的新发现，而不是认识上的新发现。幸好健君读书往往是为了寻求启发，不是为了寻求答案.[...]” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

chapter, I discussed artists and art administrators in China and in the former socialist countries who worked under a similar political system.⁴⁷³ Wu Liang's writings did not clearly acknowledge the avant-garde characteristics of Zhang's art practice, perhaps because explicit characterisation may have created difficulties given the hostile political and social conditions in China at the time.

Given the scarcity of early writings on the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the 1980s, Wu Liang's writings on Zhang's art are nonetheless an important reference. The important *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-garde* (1991), quoted Wu Liang's early writing on Shanghai avant-garde artists in its theoretical articulation. In this publication, Gao Minglu and his co-authors noted a common thread pervading the art of intellectual elites across China in the 1980s, that reflects their contemporary philosophic thinking processes. Included are the artists from the Northern Art Group (北方艺术群体) (Figure 66.), Pond Society (池社) (Figure 67), and Red Brigade (红色·旅) (Figure 68.).⁴⁷⁴ The commonality of this thinking was also found in the art of Zhang and other Shanghai artists regardless of their different art styles. It was from this common base, that Gao and his co-



Figure 66. Wang Guangyi, *Solidified Northern Polar Region – The Last Judgment* 《凝固的北方极地-最后的审判》, 1985. Oil on canvas. (Artist was a member of The Northern Art Group.)



Figure 67. Geng Jianyi, *Haircut No. 2 - the First Bald Head in the Summer of 1985* 《理发 2 号 – 1985 年夏季的第一个光头》, 1985. Oil on canvas. (Artist was a member of The Pond Society.)

⁴⁷³ See in Chapter 2 under the subheading of “Political and Bureaucratic Structures in the 1980s.”

⁴⁷⁴ See Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.158-204; Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *A History of Chinese Contemporary Art, 1979-1989*, pp.76-148.



Figure 68. Ding Fang, *Call and Birth* 《呼唤与诞生》, 1986.
Oil on canvas. (Artist was a member of
The Red Brigade group.)

authors defined the genre the “Tide of Rational [Painting]” that “a small number of theorists and some groups of artists in different places” put forward early in 1985. Zhang and other Shanghai artists were identified as the “non-group” (“非群体”) and their art described as reflecting “rationality” or an “Eastern spirit” and included in the genre of the “Tide of Rational [Painting].”⁴⁷⁵ Under this theoretical framework, Shanghai avant-garde artists were seen to be taking the form of “individual struggle” and their art was “cultural” and “academic” with a “lack of pungency and impact.”⁴⁷⁶ This assessment neglects to consider that the Shanghai avant-garde art scene already contained, from the beginning of the 1980s, the elements Gao and co-authors defined as the new genre and this is especially relevant in examining Zhang’s art as discussed in this chapter.⁴⁷⁷ I argue that Shanghai avant-garde artists were forerunners of a nascent New Wave art movement (mid 1980s), based on the art that was produced in Shanghai from 1979. The art of Zhang Jianjun and others pushed the boundaries from the norm of socialist realism art in the late 1970s by exploring artistic self-expression. Therefore, the inadequate evaluation by Gao and his co-authors of the Shanghai avant-garde artists, and the work produced from 1979, misleads our understanding of the evolution of the contemporary Chinese art discourse.⁴⁷⁸

In the past three decades, many accounts of Zhang’s art by art critics in China have focused largely on the philosophical and metaphysical elements in his work. Thus, the

⁴⁷⁵ See discussion in Chapter 1, footnote 159, where a lengthy discussion is also in the main text.

⁴⁷⁶ Gao Minglu, et al., *’85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.205. The original Chinese phrases: “文化气”, “学术气”, “较少火药味以及冲击性,” and “个人奋斗.” English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁴⁷⁷ See an in-depth analysis of the chronological displacement of Shanghai avant-garde artists in literature on contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s in Chapter 1 under the subheading of “National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s.”

⁴⁷⁸ See in-depth discussion in Chapter 1 under the subheading “National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s.”

significance of Zhang's experimental practice has been neglected or obscured in the art discourse. I have discussed in detail issues in art criticism and art historiography in China in the Introduction and in Chapter 1. It has been a common feature of art writing to pursue theoretical agendas while neglecting the original contexts of an artist's art and practice. This chapter takes account of such analyses by other writers, but importantly examines Zhang's art and practice in terms of the socio-political and socio-cultural context and by recognising the artist's actions are an integral part of his work. China's rapid economic development and measured political and social changes in the transitional period of the 1980s must be considered in order to arrive at an adequate understanding of an artist's thinking and his or her conceptual process in creating artworks. In Zhang's case, his intellectual enlightenment and philosophical studies in the 1980s were expressed and reflected not only through his distinctive body of artworks but also by his individualistic stand in opposing the collectivist art movement. Zhang's approach to art making, given the socio-political climate at the time, was a choice that challenged convention and was a radical act which was of equal significance to the final artistic product. This is the aspect that I suggest cannot be overlooked in any analysis of Zhang Jianjun's art in the 1980s.

In previous chapters I discussed the Cultural Fever phenomenon in relation to the life of the avant-garde artists in the 1980s. It affected also a generation of writers and art critics and led them to focus on the intellectual process in the art discourse. They were inevitably attracted by the conceptual or intellectual processes of art making and some were eager to generate changes in the political and social structures to maximise their impact through a collective effort. This spirit of collectivism in seeking to bring about social and political changes has dominated political and cultural movements since the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century in China. It has been the vehicle for the Communist revolutionary struggle before and after 1949 and reached extremes during the Cultural Revolution. In reaction to one collective art movement in the 1980s, Zhang expressed his views in an interview: "It was somewhat in a same vein as the socialist collective spirit," a movement he and other like-minded artists in Shanghai opposed.⁴⁷⁹ The prominent art critic Li Xianting has explained the collective tendency in art in an exhibition catalogue essay in 1992:

Chinese culture has always subjugated the individual to the group: the only difference is that traditional Chinese culture subjugated the individual within the larger framework of ethics and morality, while post-1949 socialist culture subjugated the individual to the political group. The tendency has served to destroy the vitality of the

⁴⁷⁹ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

quest of people's consciousness, artists' individual vitality is still sapped of life in a strongly collective society and their mentality was still highly politicized.⁴⁸⁰

Zhang Jianjun has stated that he firmly believes in individualistic thinking and freedom of artistic expression and that he sees the values of individualism as vital to his artistic creation.⁴⁸¹ His early experimental work and his relationship with other like-minded artists in Shanghai at the beginning of the 1980s demonstrated this consciousness of the need for an individual and independent course. He maintained his individualist stand by distancing himself from collective activities or movements, especially during the Art New Wave movement in the mid-1980s. In the following statement, Zhang provides the reason why he did not involve himself in events such as the *Huangshan Conference* and the *Zhuhai Symposium*⁴⁸² organised by influential art critics from Beijing and key artists during the mid-1980s as:

The collective effort as part of the communist ideology left horrific experiences in the past, especially from the Cultural Revolution. Slogan type activities or movements, whether political or cultural, were strongly rejected after the Cultural Revolution. ...One, I do not participate in collective activities. And second, I don't leave texts. I hope the art is expressed in a very pure visual language, rather than through words or manifestations, concepts explanations and so on. So, I consciously did not leave any text. This is what I did at the time.⁴⁸³

While Zhang eschewed what he defined as collective activities, he nevertheless participated in a collective-performance exhibition in December 1988. It was an installation and performance exhibition called *The Last Supper* which involved the participation of twelve artists and art critics at the Shanghai Art Museum, and for which he was also one of the key organisers.⁴⁸⁴ (Figure 69.) This performance work was also invited by the committee of the *China Avant-Garde Exhibition* to be shown at the National Museum of China in Beijing in February 1989. The performance could not be repeated because of the disinterest in collaboration in art production amongst the Shanghai artists. For the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in 1989, Zhang instead exhibited three mixed-media works from the

⁴⁸⁰ Li Xianting, 'Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art', in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, exh cat., ed. Valerie C Doran, Asia Art Archive, (Hong Kong, 2001), pp x-xxii.

⁴⁸¹ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴⁸² See related discussion in Chapter 1 under the subheading "National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s; also in Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art*, p.49.

⁴⁸³ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴⁸⁴ See Chapter 2 for further detailed discussion of *The Last Supper* exhibition.



Figure 69. Zhang Jianjun preparing the installation material for *The Last Supper* exhibition (1988).

Have/Existence series renamed as “*Nature series #21-1, 2, 3*” plus a variation of the painting of *Human Beings and Their Clock*. Zhang did not attend in person.⁴⁸⁵

In maintaining his individualistic position in avant-garde art activities in Shanghai during the 1980s, Zhang was active not only in his experimental art practice, but also as a key organiser of events including the influential nonofficial art exhibition *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983*.⁴⁸⁶ His role as a catalyst and a connecting point in contemporary art circles became more recognisable after he was appointed head of the Research Department and later the Director’s assistant during the transitional period when the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery became the Shanghai Art Museum under Fang Zengxian’s leadership.⁴⁸⁷ Zhang played a key role in assisting Director Fang to formulate and implement the Museum’s policy of engaging with local contemporary art. He was also responsible for the curatorial management of the Museum’s inaugural exhibition *SAM’s New Building Completion Exhibition*, which for the first time in a public art museum in China showed many works by young contemporary artists.⁴⁸⁸ As department head, Zhang was also responsible for developing an alternative exhibition space within the Museum for emerging artists. Artists such as Yuan Shun 袁顺, Li Liang 李樑, and Zhang himself, were among those who had their first solo exhibitions in this space.

⁴⁸⁵ See a related discussion of the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in Chapter 1, footnote 103.

⁴⁸⁶ See my discussion of the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983* in Chapter 1.

⁴⁸⁷ See my discussion of Zhang’s role at the SAM Chapter 2.

⁴⁸⁸ See detailed discussion of the *SAM’s New Building Completion Exhibition* in Chapter 2.

The friendship between Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan since 1979 and their shared interest in exploring new approaches to art evidences the “studio discourse” that I discussed in Chapter 1. At the beginning of the 1980s, Shanghai artists supported each other by visiting each other’s studios and exchanging views on art, social and political issues. Their art could not be shown in public and their ideas could not be publicly discussed. They could only show their art and communicate their thoughts to like-minded artist friends, all under the radar of the authorities. In Chapter 2, I defined “underground art” by adopting Hou Hanru’s articulation of “unofficial art.” Hou applied this term to artists involved in avant-garde activities of the 1980s in China who “shared the same motivation: to break down the constraints of the authority of official discourse and reclaim freedom of expression.”⁴⁸⁹ In the case of Zhang and Li Shan this was done through creating art that was highly unconventional and rejecting the constraints of official art. Their related activities were based at their studios and conducted in a way exclusive to themselves and to a small group of friends and fellow artists. Given the nature of their art activities in the context of the political and social conditions of the time, it is appropriate I suggest, to describe those activities as underground.

In 1980 Zhang and Li Shan travelled to the General’s Cliff 将军崖, a pre-historic site in the Lianyung Harbour 连云港 area in Jiangsu province to seek inspiration from the rock art. A similar interaction and exploration occurred between Zhang and Chen Zhen. In 1979 when they were both at the STA Zhang and Chen had both explored oracle bone scripts. Zhang was then a young teacher and Chen Zhen was a student at that time. They later went on to explore abstract art in their distinctive art practices in the early 1980s. As noted elsewhere in this thesis there was a strong contingent of artists, both students and lecturers, from the STA who became involved in developments in contemporary art. Another STA graduate Cai Guoqiang collaborated with Zhang to organise an exhibition called *Shanghai - Fujian Youth Modern Art Joint Exhibition* at the Fuzhou City Yushan Art Museum in June 1985.⁴⁹⁰ It was one of only two exhibitions Zhang participated in outside of Shanghai in the 1980s, the other being the *1989 China Avant-Garde Exhibition* in Beijing. He showed works from the *Have/Existence* series in both exhibitions. The relationship between Zhang and other artists in Shanghai was such that they emerged as a “group” only when they came together to show their art in public. Afterwards, they dispersed back into their own private spaces to pursue their own individual artistic goals.

⁴⁸⁹ Hou Hanru, “Towards an ‘Un-Unofficial Art’: De-ideologicalisation of China’s Contemporary Art in the 1990s”, (*Third Text*, 34, Spring 1996) in *On The Mid-Ground* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), p.24.

⁴⁹⁰ See further discussion on this exhibition in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the contributions from the community-level local arts centres and Workers Clubs in the development of contemporary art in Shanghai.⁴⁹¹ These local art centres were connected to wider art communities throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Classes during the 1970s and the early 1980s at such local centres served as a grassroots public forum where artists gathered and new ideas on art, mostly on modernism, were disseminated. Zhang was also involved in the first half of the 1980s in supporting the local art communities by teaching art classes at various art and cultural centres in Shanghai districts outside of his day job.⁴⁹² The classes ranged from life drawing, still-life in gouache or oil painting, outdoor landscape painting, etc. Those attending Zhang's classes were people of varied ages and backgrounds, from art teachers and local amateur artists to young students preparing for art college entry exams. In his classes, he not only taught basic skills for drawing and painting, but also encouraged students to develop their own individual ideas with which to approach art, and introduced them to contemporary art activities. It was through his teaching that he attracted many followers who became interested in modern and contemporary art. I argue that Zhang was an important catalyst in building a contemporary art environment in Shanghai at the grassroots level of the local art communities.

International Influences and Interactions

In examining contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s, an important question that continues to draw the attention of global and local art historians is how contemporary international art influenced or interacted with China's art discourse and art practice. Contemporary international art discourse was relatively unknown in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s as cultural activities or interaction with the outside art world mostly took place through official channels even during the early reform era. In this period, art in China was developing its own discourse, albeit within the officially sanctioned political and social frameworks, but against the background of the legacy of modernism. In Shanghai, interaction with the outside art world and access to information or sources on international contemporary art became possible in the mid-1980s. When Zhang was asked about his awareness and knowledge of the international art scene during the period at the beginning of the 1980s when he was creating his early experimental works, he stated:

Right, but at that time it was very early, around 1981. I hadn't seen any earlier evidence of people doing that kind of work. There were no reference materials available and I didn't see [work] such as Julian Schnabel using the plate affixed to the canvas,

⁴⁹¹ See in Chapter 1 under the subheading "The Matrix of Art Institutions and Organisations."

⁴⁹² Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

although he was producing this kind of work only after 1982. At that time, I think I was affected by "Dao" (Tao).⁴⁹³

In November 1984, while Zhang was struggling as an artist, the Los Angeles-based entrepreneur, philanthropist, and art collector, Frederick R. Weisman, made a business trip to Shanghai. The host for his visit, the owner of a company that traded between Hong Kong and Shanghai, and his son, were also very interested in art. Aware of Weisman's interest in modern and contemporary art they arranged for him and his assistant to meet local artists. He invited a group of artists to bring recent works for a private viewing in the company office. Weisman was attracted by their impulse towards experimentation and the radical changes taking place in Shanghai at that time, and decided to purchase a selection of artworks from what he had seen. He bought Zhang Jianjun's *Eternal Dialogue* together with another two works on paper from Chen Jialing 陈家泠 and Kong Boji 孔伯基, and two canvases from Dai Hengyang 戴恒扬 and Zhao Weiliang 赵渭良 - all Shanghai artists. Unlike the other works that he purchased mostly in the modernist style, *Eternal Dialogue* was abstract and in mixed-media and fetched the highest price paid in China for a single contemporary artwork sold in the 1980s.⁴⁹⁴ The collector paid USD10,000 for the artwork, an enormous amount for Chinese art at that time. The artist became a "Wan Yuan Hu 万元户" an expression almost equivalent to a millionaire overnight. It was arguably the first publicly known occasion in Shanghai since the CCP took power in 1949, where a contemporary Chinese artwork was purchased by a major Western art collector/private art institution. The significance of this event was the international recognition of contemporary art developments in China, and in establishing a benchmark for a virtually absent contemporary art market in Shanghai in particular and China in general. After Weisman took his new collection back to Los Angeles, the *Eternal Dialogue* was selected to join the Weisman Foundation's collection exhibition and travelled around the United States later in the same year. For the first time, Zhang Jianjun's art was shown outside of China.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹³ Zhang Jianjun, "Interviewed by Wen Zijian," 2009. The original Chinese text: "对，但那时候很早，那是1981年左右，没有看到比这更早的记录，那时候没有任何资料，像 Julian Schnabel 把盘子贴到画面的做法也没有看过，而且他也是82年之后做的这类作品。那时候我觉得是受「道」的影响。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. Zhang also confirmed this during my interviews with him in 2004 and 2008, and in our subsequent discussions, as well as in his interview with the Asia Art Archive in 2009.

⁴⁹⁴ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴⁹⁵ *ibid.* The host company 'Hai Lian 海联' was represented in Shanghai by Mr Chen, the son of the owner. Detailed information about the company provided by the artist is limited. In an email Zhang sent me on 11 January 2013, he confirmed that this was the first showing of his art outside of China.

One of the early overseas art exhibitions Zhang participated in was the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum's 9th Group Exhibition in Japan in 1986. The exhibition was organised by the artist Zhao Yifu 赵一夫 through his personal contacts in Japan.⁴⁹⁶ Zhang was among the artists invited to participate in the exhibition, in which he showed a figurative oil painting *Wrestling Among Men* (1984). (Figure 70.) Although the international exhibition was not museum-curated, it did reflect the close link in the arts between China and Japan not only in historical terms but also in contemporary life in the 1980s.⁴⁹⁷ In 1987



Figure 70. Zhang Jianjun, *Wrestling Among Men* 《人的角力》1985. Oil on canvas.

⁴⁹⁶ Zhao Yifu is also a Shanghai artist, whose oil paintings are in the realist style. He studied at the Shanghai Fine Art College in the early 1980s. He went to Japan in 1989, then moved to the USA in 1990.

⁴⁹⁷ See discussion on the cultural history and connections between China and Japan in the Introduction to this thesis and footnote 39, 265, 320. For further information on modern and contemporary art links between China and East Asia countries, especially Japan, see scholarly studies for example: Joshua A. Fogel, ed. *The Role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Shen Kuiyi, "The Japanese Impact on the Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Field - A Case Study of Teng Gu and Fu Baoshi," in *The Role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). In a recent international discussion on ink art in East Asian countries the roots in traditional Chinese ink painting were noted. [Gao Minglu, *Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese "Abstraction,"* exh cat. (Shanghai, 2007); and Shen Kuiyi, *Nanhai Art Seminar Series: Ink as Cultural*, video recording (2 November 2013), <<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=ITfxHCZznE>>, viewed 18 April 2019.] International art historians have been actively engaged in writing about contemporary art developments and interactions between East Asia countries, however this area has not been fully studied in relation to the Chinese contemporary art discourse. See John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998); Caroline Turner, "The enigma of contemporary Japanese art," *Art and Social Change: Contemporary art on Asia and the Pacific* ed. Caroline Turner (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005.); Joshua A. Fogel, ed. *The role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Olivier Krischer, "Chinese Contemporary Abstract, 1980s Until Present: Mindmap," (2012) *ArtAsiaPacific* (web review) <<http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/ChineseContemporaryAbstract1980sUntilPresentMindmap>>, viewed 18 April 2019. Two important scholarly books on the international contributions of avant-garde postwar Japanese artists are Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), and Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016).

the Hong Kong Art Centre held an exhibition called *Shanghai Paintings: the Transformation of Chinese Art*, organised by Alice King 金董建平 the owner of the Hong Kong Yi Chang Gallery who played an important role in introducing mainland contemporary art into the international art market at the time when Hong Kong was still under British rule.⁴⁹⁸ The exhibition showed the works of twelve artists, including Zhang Jianjun's series *Misty Rain* paintings. Hong Kong in the late 1980s was an important bridge between mainland contemporary art and the international art world. Key gallerists, writers and art historians including Johnson Chang 张颂仁 and Oscar Ho 何庆基 in Hong Kong, as well as Gao Minglu in China and international writers who had visited or lived in China, such as Joan Lebold Cohen, began to document the rise of contemporary Chinese art in a wide range of international publications.⁴⁹⁹ Cultural relations established between China and a number of Western countries also led to exchanges, including through exhibitions.⁵⁰⁰

An important international exhibition Zhang participated in was the semi-official *Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings from the People's Republic of China* held at the Pacific Asia Museum, California in 1987. Zhang's selected works were from the *Have/Existence* series. The exhibition was sponsored by the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), an American oil company, and organised by the Pacific Asia Museum with the Shanghai Artists Association as the Chinese counterpart. Waldemar A Nielsen, then a Senior Fellow at the Aspen Institute, was the key person in contributing the original concept of the exhibition and the selection process for the artworks.⁵⁰¹ Unlike recent Chinese contemporary art exhibitions which tend to follow thematic concepts, this exhibition took a general survey approach in selecting the artworks. This approach was intended to present to an international audience an understanding of what was happening in the Chinese art scene at that time. In the Introduction to the exhibition, the Museum director David Kamansky stated that while the exhibition "does not represent contemporary art from all the major centres of artistic life in China, it does provide us with a very realistic view of what is happening in three of the major centres – Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Nanjing. These three

⁴⁹⁸ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2004, 2008).

⁴⁹⁹ In Li Shan's biography on the Chinese art auction webpage [zhuokearts.com](http://www.zhuokearts.com) 卓克艺术网, Alice King recalled that Joan Lebold Cohen's article *Attention Has Turned to Paintings*, published in the Wall Street Journal Asian Edition, (1987) and Gao Minglu's 1991 publication *The Contemporary Chinese Art History (1985-1986)*, had both commented on the vibrant art exhibition scene in the mainland and in Hong Kong. ([zhuokearts.com](http://www.zhuokearts.com), Hefei Artnet Cultural Communication Pty Ltd and Hefei Zhuoke Internet Information Service Pty Ltd 合肥美网文化传播有限公司, 合肥卓克网络信息服务有限公司, 2010, <<http://auction.zhuokearts.com/artsviw.aspx?id=26594359>> Viewed: 12/01/2013.)

⁵⁰⁰ See a lengthy discussion related to this topic in Chapter 1 under the subheading "Key International Exhibitions in Shanghai in the Late 1970s and Early 1980s."

⁵⁰¹ David Karmansky, "Introduction," *Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings from the People's Republic of China*, exh cat., Pacific Asia Museum Pasadena, (California, 1987), p. 9.

cities have long been art centres.”⁵⁰² The paintings on show varied in style with influences ranging from socialist realism, impressionism, expressionism, cubism, photo-realism, to abstraction and postmodernism. The exhibition also included several Chinese ink paintings. The exhibition’s catalogue essayist Richard E. Strassberg described such diversity as “a result of a more in-depth view of the current Chinese art world which clearly includes many who are creating art on their own, only tangentially connected with any official apparatus.”⁵⁰³ The paintings on display included subjects and styles including sensuality and abstraction, which had been previously forbidden by the authorities. Strassberg went on to say that “some of these works are particularly impactful because they suggest that the boldness of such stylistic experimentation is a sign that more serious questions are beginning to be raised about human issues of universal significance.”⁵⁰⁴ The paintings in the exhibition were mostly bought by the Museum as part of its collection.

In autumn 1987, Zhang Jianjun received an Asian Cultural Council (ACC) Grant as a visiting artist to New York for an eight-month residency programme. Another three artists in different fields also received the grant and the four travelled together: the film director Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, the conductor Chen Xieyang 陈燮阳 from the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, and the art critic Liu Jianwei 刘建威 from Hong Kong. The opportunity had come after a visit to Shanghai between 1986 and 1987 by the ACC Senior Advisor Ralph Samuelson. It was later understood that this visit was to identify suitable candidates for the ACC Visiting Artists Programme. Samuelson’s first contacts through the official channels did not meet his expectations. He then contacted his personal friend Meng Guang (孟光) to assist. Meng was a former lecturer at the Shanghai Fine Art College and a well-respected art educator in the Shanghai art community. Meng invited more than twenty young artists to his home. Each artist was asked to bring works that best represented his/her art. Zhang was among the artists invited. Artists were not aware of the purpose of Samuelson’s trip at the time; they only knew Meng’s American friend was interested in looking at the local contemporary art. One month later, Zhang received a letter from the ACC inviting him for an interview with Michelle Vosper in Shanghai.⁵⁰⁵ He was offered the residency.

⁵⁰² *ibid.*

⁵⁰³ Richard E. Strassberg, “The Opening Door of Contemporary Chinese Painting,” *Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings from the People’s Republic of China*, exh cat., Pacific Asia Museum Pasadena, (California, 1987), p.12. Richard E. Strassberg was an Adjunct Curator of Chinese Art at the Pacific Asia Museum, and an Associate Professor of Chinese at University of California, Los Angeles.

⁵⁰⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ Michelle Vosper was the Asian Cultural Council representative in Hong Kong.

During his eight-month programme in New York between 1987 and 1988, Zhang travelled across the USA visiting many major art museums, and met many artists and art critics. He had a solo show at Harvard University that was curated by Wu Hung in 1988.⁵⁰⁶ He also showed the *Have/Existence Series* at the Kay Garvey Gallery in Illinois. Two months after his return to Shanghai, he went to Germany to participate in the Shanghai Contemporary Art Exhibition organised by the East Gallery in Berlin. The doors to the international art world were now wide open to Chinese contemporary artists like Zhang Jianjun. Zhang was forced to move to the United States in July 1989 because he had publicly supported the students' demonstration in Beijing that led to the June Fourth Incident in Tiananmen Square. Not until 1995, when he was invited to participate in the first Shanghai Biennale planned for the following year, was he able to return to China.⁵⁰⁷ Living in the United States from the end of the 1980s, Zhang's art evolved from painting to installation, and later to multimedia and performance as well as large sculptures. This change had been signalled in his works in the *Have/Existence* series produced in the late 1980s as he started to attach objects such as rocks, tree branches, and hemp ropes onto canvas. Nevertheless, his interest in time and space and humanity in his art from the 1980s has been sustained through his art career. Examples of more recent works are the installation *Ink Garden* (2002) where the forms are sculptured from solid ink blocks modelled on rocks found in the Taihu Lake 太湖 region in Jiangsu Province which were traditionally used in Chinese gardens as symbolic of mountains. (Figure 71.) A water spout was placed into the top of some ink rocks so that water ran through the rock dissolving the ink over a period of time. The work provided an experience of contemplative strolling through a Chinese garden and explored the concepts of "time" and "process." In this work the artist reveals the continuity in his practice with works from the 1980s such as *Eternal Dialogue* in his focus on relationships between humans, nature and traditional culture.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁶ In this exhibition, Zhang exhibited a group of works with ink on rice paper produced between 1987 to 1988. This group of ink paintings belonged to his *Misty Rain* series. (Personal note (sms) from Zhang Jianjun to Lansheng Zhang on 25 April 2019.)

⁵⁰⁷ The Shanghai Biennale's committee invited only three Shanghai-born overseas Chinese artists to participate in the first Shanghai Biennale *Open Space* held at Shanghai Art Museum in 1996. The artists were Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, and Gu Wenda. Zhang showed a video installation *Taichi • 迪斯科 [disco]* (1996) that consisted of 50 television screens in a circle playing videos of Chinese people doing morning exercise rituals along the Bund (Shanghai's famous waterfront) with one group practicing Taichi to traditional music and another group dancing to Western popular music. As the title indicates, the artist expressed his concerns on popular culture and cultural misreading.

⁵⁰⁸ See Britta Erickson, "Zhang Jian-Jun," in *Art Collection Magazine*, July (2003); Richard Vine, "Report from China: The Wild, Wild West," *Art in America*, Volume. 91, No. 9, (2003).



Figure 71. Zhang Jianjun, *Ink Garden*, site-specific, 2002.
Goldfish, water, copper, ink, and old bricks.
(The installation at the Shanghai Biennale 2002.)

In an article on the temporal features of Zhang's works, Robert Morgan wrote in 2007: "His work articulates a process of time, history and memory through the act of perception. For Zhang, time is essential to how human beings perceive and acculturate themselves to the existing transitional environment."⁵⁰⁹ Zhang's later works have often used ink and rice paper to express his conceptual ideas. This interest in Chinese cultural traditions can be traced back to the *Misty Rain* series paintings he produced from 1985 in his earlier explorations using both traditional art materials such as ink and rice paper with oil and acrylic paints. Chinese ink as an essential medium in traditional painting and calligraphy represents a long history of Chinese cultural identity. Its use in contemporary Chinese art since the 1980s now has a place in the global art world, not only as the continuum of Chinese traditional culture, but also in international contemporary art.⁵¹⁰ The exhibition *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (2013) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is evidence of this significant development which expands the scope of "ink" in

⁵⁰⁹ Robert C. Morgan, "Zhang Jianjun: Memory and the Process of Historical Time," in exh cat., *Zhang Jian-Jun: Vestiges of a Process* (Singapore: iPreciation, 2007).

⁵¹⁰ Ink in contemporary art production is a current discussion in China and in international art discourse. Example of writings include: Gao Minglu, *Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese "Abstraction,"* exh cat. (Shanghai, 2007); and Shen Kuiyi, Nanhai Art Seminar Series: Ink as Cultural Identity, video recording (2 November 2013), <<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=ITfxHCZpnE>>, viewed 18 April 2019.

art. Zhang's work *Scholar Rock (The Mirage Garden)*, (2008) was also included in this exhibition.⁵¹¹ In recent times there has been a considerable body of writing published, both internationally and in China, on Zhang's art. Most is dealing with his works from the 1990s through the 2000s which will not be treated in depth here due to the scope of this thesis. However, these key works from this period are listed in Zhang Jianjun's biography in the Appendix of this thesis.⁵¹² Zhang's works, including his early works of the 1980s, have been selected for major exhibitions in recent years, for example, *The 12th National Art Exhibition: Section of Experimental Art*, Today Art Museum, Beijing (2014); *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (2013); *Portrait of the Times: 30 Years of Chinese Contemporary Art*, Power Station of Art, Shanghai (2013); *Turn to Abstraction: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art From 1976 to 1985*, Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai (2008). He has also had solo exhibitions such as *The 1980s: Early Works by Jian-Jun Zhang (1978-1988)*, Yuz Museum, Shanghai (2015). However, critical writing on Zhang's art in the 1980s in the current discourse in China remains unchanged and the fundamental question of the spirit of individualism in his pioneering art practice from that decade has still not been addressed in more recent literature.

In this chapter, I have noted other writers who have recognised Zhang's philosophical approach in developing a new artistic language in many of his 1980s works about the relationship between humanity and the universe. However, I have taken a different approach with an emphasis on Zhang's experimental practice from the end of the 1970s through the 1980s and in defining that practice as a radical avant-garde statement. In the socio-political environment in China where art had been under the official dictum of socialist realism until the late 1970s, the practice of making and creating a radically different art had a special significance. I argue that the act of experimenting with new techniques, materials and media in art-making can be in itself a clear statement of intent to exercise freedom of expression and to challenge the conformity and constraints of official art. My approach has focused on Zhang's practice and is adopted due to the artist's own choice to express his thoughts and emotions through his artworks rather than in words.⁵¹³ I analysed in this chapter the independence and individualism of Zhang's thinking and art making, and its place in contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s. Through my research, I have demonstrated

⁵¹¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, exh cat., *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). Also see the Metropolitan Museum of Art website as <<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/ink-art>>, viewed 16 April 2019.

⁵¹² See in Appendix 1 "Artists' Biographies."

⁵¹³ See Zhang Jianjun's statement in this chapter, p.1.

that there is a lack of adequate research and evaluation on the significance of Zhang Jianjun's art in the 1980s in both international and Chinese art discourses.⁵¹⁴

Zhang's experimental art practice in which he persevered against great odds and his independence in resisting and opposing collective movements in the 1980s exemplified the quality of individualism he shared with other avant-garde artists in Shanghai. His experiments with mixed media in painting in the early 1980s were radical, unprecedented, and unique at the time and were a forerunner to later developments in the avant-garde art scene in China. These experiments posed a great challenge to the dominant official socialist aesthetic values. Therefore, in the context of the immediate post Cultural Revolution years of the 1980s his art was also a strong avant-garde statement in advocating for individualism and "freedom of expression" as Hou has defined that term. I argued that when we examine the importance of an artist's thinking and the conceptual meaning in the artworks of the 1980s in China, we should also equally evaluate the significance of the act — the art practice itself. Zhang's artistic endeavours in the 1980s and later, display elements that can be traced from his fascination with space and time since his childhood. The evidence provided in this chapter has demonstrated the legacy of modernism in the evolution of his art and ideas through his art teachers and their influence on his formative years. Zhang Jianjun's art practice and the artistic language he developed and utilised were close to post-modern art practices in the West and were beyond the local art discourse of the time. His art in the 1980s was an early call for a radical change in aesthetic values in the 1980s. I have also illustrated in this chapter the role he played as a catalyst through his relationships with other artists, the making of challenging exhibitions, and the key role he played in engaging with and encouraging engagement with contemporary art when he worked at Shanghai Art Museum in the 1980s.

⁵¹⁴ My research finds that there is no major study on his early 1980s pioneering experimental work in China with the exception of Wu Liang's early articles on Zhang's work in the 1980s. Not until early 2015, when a private art collector, Budi Tek, the founder of the newly established Yuz Art Museum in Shanghai in 2014, obtained the artist's personal collection of his later 1970s works as well as 27 pieces of his early 1980s experimental works. Tek's entire collection was displayed in the Yuz Museum as part of the exhibition of *Myth/History II: Shanghai Galaxy*, curated by Wu Hung in early 2015.

Chapter 4.

Li Shan: A Nonconformist Artist

Li Shan was a pivotal figure in avant-garde art in Shanghai during the late 1970s and 1980s. In this chapter I analyse his position at the vanguard of changes in art in Shanghai during the 1980s. I argue that his distinctive visual expressions in the 1980s, in a similar way to his friend Zhang Jianjun's experimental artworks which I discussed in the previous chapter, questioned, and at times challenged, the cultural and socio-political status quo in China. Li's artistic career and his active involvement in major avant-garde art events in the 1980s also exemplify, I argue, the spirit of individualism and the influence of early Shanghai modernists. Shanghai avant-garde artists such as Zhang and Li played a critical role in the period leading up to the '85 Art New Wave movement, but I argue that the significance of their contributions (and those of other Shanghai avant-garde artists) in the 1980s has been overlooked in the national discourse.

My investigation in this chapter will focus on the nonconformist character of Li Shan and his art through a personal history, the development of his own distinctive artistic language, and his active and leading role in the Shanghai avant-garde art scene. Li was at the forefront of avant-garde and experimental art activities in China in the period of the early 1980s and his works have been widely exhibited overseas since the 1990s.⁵¹⁵ This is highlighted by his participation in the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁵ Li's art activities and exhibitions in the 1980s will be discussed throughout this chapter. Major international exhibitions in which Li participated in the 1990s include: *Encountering the Others - Projektgruppe Stoffwechsel*, Documenta Kassel, Kassel, Germany (1992); *China's New Art, Post-1989* in Hong Kong (1993); *China Avant-Garde, 45th Venice Biennale* in Italy (1993); *Mao Goes Pop* in Australia (1993); the *22nd International Biennial of São Paulo* in Brazil (1994); *Des Pais del Centre, Avantgardes Artistiques Xineses*, Santa Monica Art Centre, Barcelona, Spain (1995); *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* in the United States (1998). In his busy international exhibitions schedule of the 1990s, domestically, Li also participated in two exhibitions in Shanghai, *New Voices: Contemporary Art Dialogue Among [sic]* (1998) and *Difference Apperceive*, (1999) at Liu Haisu Art Museum, Shanghai; and *Building the Rouge Empire: Paintings from 1976-1992*, Alisan Fine Arts at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong (1994); *New Voices: Contemporary Art Dialogue Among [sic]*, Hong Kong Art Center, Hong Kong and National Taiwan Art Education Institute, Taipei (1998).

⁵¹⁶ In the *45th Venice Biennale*, Li Shan showed three paintings from the *Rouge* series titled *Belletto No.36*, *No.37*, and *No.3*, which will be discussed later in this chapter. (See in *XLV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte* (Venezia: de Marsilio Editori S.A.P., 1993). The participation of contemporary Chinese artists in the 45th Venice Biennale was significant in the landscape of international contemporary art but a detailed examination of this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis. See Wang Nanming 王南溟, "Francesca and the ins and outs of the 'Road to the East' [Exhibition] in the 1993 Venice Biennale" ("弗兰与 1993 年威尼斯双年展 '东方之路' 的前前后后"), Interview with Francesca Dal Lago, April 2008. <www.artda.cn/view.php?tid=9643&cid=15>, viewed 05 June 2017.

Despite his international success, Li's work, I argue, did not have the same reach or impact in China in the 1990s. There is, however, a body of literature on Li Shan's work by Chinese critics as well as Western writers, including interviews in exhibition catalogues, magazine articles, and important books published in the 1990s and 2000s, which examine Li's work produced from 1990s onward.⁵¹⁷ There are limited writings on Li's early 1980s work with the most notable written by Qian Ping in the late 1980s and Wu Liang and Gao Minglu in the early 1990s.⁵¹⁸ The lack of writings on contemporary art in Shanghai in the 1980s in general is one of the reasons for the scarcity of writing on Li.⁵¹⁹ These early publications recognise Li's art as being concerned with the human condition and not a scientific approach based on biology and their analysis of his work was from the humanities perspective.

In analysing the different stages and styles in Li's art in the 1980s, Qian Ping wrote an article "Truth: the perplexed choice" in 1987 and discussed how his use of different visual vocabularies resulted in an ambiguous or perplexed set of artistic choices. Qian observed that the art in Li's *Primeval* 《初始》 series created "a sense of lukewarm reality."⁵²⁰ (Figure 72) It evoked the viewer's emotions associated with a primal human state. Li's multiple artistic styles in early and later paintings in the 1980s reflected the artist's perplexed choice "in front of a cosmic 'reality'" (在宇宙的 '真实' 面前). The word "life" (生命) appeared several times in Qian's interpretation of Li's work.⁵²¹ In an article published a few years later in 1990, Wu Liang provided an account of Li Shan's personality and his art at different stages

⁵¹⁷ See for example: Valerie C. Doran, ed. *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993); Meg Maggio, "Exhibition Review: 'China's New Art, Post-1989', Hanart TZ Gallery," in *Orientations Magazine* vol.4 no.5 (1993); Huang Jun, *'89-'92 Contemporary Art of China* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Art Publishing, 1994); Gao Minglu, ed. *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (New York, Berkeley: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Asia Society Galleries, The University of California Press, 1998); Leng Lin, *It's Me!* (Beijing: The Publishing House of the China Literary Federation, 2000); Karen Smith, *Nine lives: the birth of avant-garde art in new China* (1st Scalo ed) (New York, Zurich: Scalo, Prestel, 2006).

⁵¹⁸ See Qian Ping, "Truth: the perplexed choice" (真实—困惑的选择), in *Visual Art*, (1987): 1-2. See Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged" (李山: 多变的和不变的), in *A Collection of Essays by Wu Liang: A Series of Contemporary Art Criticism in China* (《吴亮自选集: 中国当代艺术批评文库》) (Taiyuan: Beiyue Arts Publishing House (Beiyue wenyi chubanshe), 2014). Also, first published in *Yishu Fengchao* [Art Trend] (discontinued) Taiwan early 1990s. See Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.216-218.

⁵¹⁹ See related discussion in Chapter 1 under the heading "National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."

⁵²⁰ Qian Ping, "Truth: the perplexed choice," 1-2. The original Chinese text: "那种若即若离的真实感." English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 2. The original Chinese text: "[...] 世界是由生命组成的, 而一切生命都和自己一样是有知有灵的 [...]" [The world is made up of life, and all lives are like oneself in having awareness and souls.] English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. The early *Primeval* series and the later *Extension* series are examined in detail below.



Figure 72. Li Shan, *Primeval* 《初始》, 1982. Oil on canvas.

in the 1980s, exploring Li's interests in ancient human cultures and mysticism in Eastern philosophy. He suggested Chinese ancient rock art and the French artist Henri Rousseau's naive style in painting had influenced Li's early work.⁵²² In the book *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* published (1991), under the rubric of the "Tide of Rational (Painting)" in analysing a strong philosophical tendency in painting which was observed as having emerged in 1985, Gao Minglu and co-authors took a theoretical approach by framing the works of Li Shan and other Shanghai artists (including their early 1980s works) as encompassing a "profoundly rational and Eastern spirit" (深沉的理性和东方精神).⁵²³ With Li Shan's artworks specifically, the writers defining Li's central concerns was about the "state of life and existence" (生命存在状态), and asserted that Li's art were "symbolic hints of the unknown origin of life and its existential state" (对未知的生命起源、存在状态的符号性暗示) but "are not the enquiries of philosophy of life" (不是生命哲学的思辨). They viewed Li's early 1980s works as belonging to the "人文范式" [humanistic

⁵²² Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged," pp.40-44. The article was written in 1990. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵²³ Zhou Yan, one of the co-authors of *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* was responsible for writing Chapter 3 under the subheading of the "Tide of Rational [Painting]" in this publication. In this chapter, Gao and Zhou defined the term as referring to a tendency of "rational painting" in 1985. They stated: "The 'Rational Painting' is simply painting with a philosophical tendency. It has gradually become a trend since 1985, so [it] was termed the 'Tide of Rational [Painting]'. The original Chinese text: "理性绘画"只是一种具有哲学倾向的绘画。而这种绘画自1985年以来逐渐形成一股潮流，故称为'理性之潮'。"(See Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.152.) Later in a publication, Gao used the phrase "different schools of the rational painting movement" in referring the "Tide of Rational [Painting]" [See Gao Minglu, "From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation," in *Li Shan* exh cat. (Shanghai: PSA, 2017), p.7. See also related discussion of the '85 Movement in Chapter 1 under the subheading of "*National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s.*"] English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

paradigm].⁵²⁴ As I mentioned earlier, in examining Li's art practice during the late 1970s and in the 1980s in its socio-political context, I found discrepancies in the chronological account given by Gao and co-authors on art productions by Li Shan and other Shanghai artists, in which their art was defined under the heading the "Tide of Rational (Painting)." This Chapter will probe the theoretical inconsistencies in Gao Minglu's earlier concept related to humanism and the later assertions by Gao of a biological scientific language in Li Shan's art from the 1980s.⁵²⁵ I argue that the core concern in Li Shan's art during the 1980s is consistent within a humanities framework and in this chapter I will examine Li's concern with the human condition in relation to sexuality.⁵²⁶

Although Li Shan's art production has attracted a great deal of interest from Chinese and international art writers, there remains a lack of in-depth studies undertaken in China and overseas on his role in the 1980s avant-garde art scene in Shanghai. Drawing on my association with Li since the beginning of the 1980s, and conversations and formal interviews we have had over the years, as well as some key writings about his work, this chapter will examine Li's path to study art from his youth in provincial northeast China to the strong influence of modernism he was exposed to during his study at the STA. I will

⁵²⁴ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.216-217. I understand the "humanistic paradigm" from Gao and co-authors refers to a concern with human beings and humanity and drawing on disciplines such as philosophy as opposed to the scientific framework discussed later in this chapter. According to the online Encyclopaedia Britannica, the "Humanities, those branches of knowledge that concern themselves with human beings and their culture or with analytic and critical methods of inquiry derived from an appreciation of human values and of the unique ability of the human spirit to express itself." <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanities>>. Gao also referred to Li's early art as "'melded to a philosophical humanism" as I consider later in this chapter. (See Gao Minglu, "From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation," pp.7-12.)

⁵²⁵ Gao Minglu, "From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation," pp.5-24. A retrospective exhibition focusing on Li Shan's BioArt from the mid-1990s was staged at the Power Station of Art (PSA) in Shanghai and opened on 25 August 2017. The exhibition was part of the PSA Collection Series project and curated by Gong Yan, the director of PSA. In Gao's essay for that exhibition he takes a position which contradicts his previous analysis of Li Shan's work in the 1980s by moving from a humanities framework to the biological sciences paradigm.

⁵²⁶ In relation to sexuality in Li's art, the concern with the human condition has been reflected or analysed in the writings by critics including: Qian Ping, "Truth: the perplexed choice;" Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged;" Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.216-218; Nicholas Jose, "Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989-93," *China's New Art, Post-1989*, p.XXXVII; Chang Tsong-zung, "Preface to the 2001 Edition," *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart Gallery, 1993), p.II; Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the birth of avant-garde art in new China*; Wu Liang, *Conversation of Li Shan*, Zhang Huang and Wu Liang, 2004. Shanghart Gallery website. <<http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/40>>, viewed July 2010; Zhao Chuan, 《上海抽象的故事》 [*The Story of Shanghai Abstract (Art)*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2006); Heather Russell, "Q & A with Chinese Contemporary Artist Li Shan: on political pop art and the cultural role of the artist in China," July 26, 2013. <<https://news.artnet.com/market/q-amp-a-with-chinese-contemporary-artist-li-shan-49340>>, viewed 15 October 2018.

interrogate Li Shan's primary concerns in his work and the nonconformist aspects in his artistic endeavours. I assert that the spirit of individualism appeared early in Li Shan's life and permeated his artistic practice and career from the early 1980s. While this chapter focuses predominantly on his art created during the 1980s, it also examines some of the artist's earlier works in the late 1970s and some later works after the 1980s, in order to contextualise the artist's creative trajectory in Shanghai in the 1980s.

An Independent Mind

The experience of three decades (1950s, 60s, and 70s) of social and political changes in China, with the constraints of a tight political environment, affected the lives of a generation of Chinese artists such as Li Shan. A closer examination of the early life experiences of Li allows us to understand better how a boy from northern China become a prominent avant-garde artist in Shanghai and the factors that helped shape his ideas and his art in the 1980s.

Li Shan was born in 1942 into a farmer's family in the country near Lanxi 兰西, Heilongjiang 黑龙江 province in northern China.⁵²⁷ He attended primary school in his home town. Society in China at the time was much politicised including the school environment in the 1950s under the Party's regime. In his formative years, Li's dream was to study science and be a scientist – a subject in which he has maintained a lifelong interest.⁵²⁸ As an excellent primary school student in mathematics and science, Li was admitted to a prestigious regional high school, the Lanxi County No.1 Middle School in Suiyuan 绥远 city, over 60 kilometres away from his home town. While boarding at school, the government provided school dormitories for students from remote areas, but the families had to cover the living costs. An act of defiance against the head-teacher turned Li's interests in a new direction. The 16-year-old Li decided himself to suspend schooling for one year from fear of repercussions that might jeopardise his dream to enter one of the top universities in China.⁵²⁹ During the year away from the school, Li read numerous novels and history books

⁵²⁷ Both Li Shan's parents, Li Guangsheng 李广生 (father) and He Yongfang 贺永芳 (mother) were farmers. (Li Shan, *A personal note to Lansheng Zhang*, Shanghai, November 12, 2018). Li Shan's life story is based on my two recorded interviews (April 2005, October 2011), conversations and personal notes (November 10 and 12, 2018).

⁵²⁸ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, Shanghai, October 2011.

⁵²⁹ In my interview with Li Shan, he recalled that in the second year of high school, "the head teacher reported to the School management that in the previous year I was 'unconcerned about the community' (不关心集体)." He went on to explain "I was heavily criticised for refusing duties assigned to me by the head teacher" and it was the repercussion from this action that "had changed my life." Being politically receptive and sensitive, such a report "might be seen opposing the socialist ideology" in a highly-politicised environment amid the "Great Leap Forward Campaign" and at the door step of the "Anti Rightists Campaign" in the 1950s. Though Li was a

by authors from China and the Soviet Union. His interests diversified to literature and history and he became fascinated by what he called “written words.”⁵³⁰ He resumed schooling the following year with a strong interest in the humanities. He subsequently passed the highly competitive university entry examination and in 1963 was admitted to the Foreign Language Department of Heilongjiang University in Harbin, North China.

Li Shan’s independent thinking led him to make critical choices from an early age. This can be illustrated by the fact that he dropped out from Heilongjiang University after two months as he belatedly discovered that he had no interest in studying foreign languages.⁵³¹ He made the decision to leave the University without discussing it with anyone beforehand. The opportunity of entering a university to study in China was regarded as a highly coveted privilege in the early 1960s. His action upset his parents and outraged people around him. He returned to the high school where he had graduated and talked to the art teacher about his wish to study art. Li recalled that the art teacher had been very supportive and had recognised his talent in his early school years winning praise as an emerging “artist” or “talent” through participating in various art activities in the school. Those art activities included creating and drawing the masthead for the school promotion blackboard, and designing and painting posters for the school’s sports events or for promoting the Great Leap Forward 大跃进, a major government political and economic movement from 1958 to 1962. According to Li the art teacher was shocked at the news that he had dropped out of University to study to be a professional artist, upset over Li’s innocence and naivety in making such a radical decision. The teacher understood the difficulty to fulfil the dream of a young man like Li, who came from the small town of Lanxi without an art background. The teacher himself was self-taught without formal art training but was talented in folk art specialising in paper-cuts. He told Li he was not able to prepare or train him for entering the art academy. However, to support Li in pursuing his dream the teacher gave him his collection of art objects which included a plaster relief bust of Voltaire used for training in drawing, as well as popular Soviet Union magazines such as 《苏联画报》 [Soviet Union

young school student, political sensitivity was a survival skill learned from a young age. He therefore decided to take one year off school to avoid any potential damage. Recalling this story a half century later, Li said that this teacher still did not realise how his ill-considered remark had drastically changed his life. Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan’s studio, (Shanghai, October 2011).

⁵³⁰ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang. Li recalled the books that were the most popular and available at the time included the Chinese novels *A History of Enterprise* 《创业史》; *Vast Forest and Wide Snow Field* 《林海雪原》; *Sound of Youth* 《青春之歌》; *Red Sun* 《红日》 and socialist realist novels from the Soviet Union translated into Chinese including Gorky’s *Mother*; Vsevolod Kochetov’s *Brother Yershov*; Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How The Steel Was Tempered*. These publications were promoted by the Party and as revolutionary novels were popular from the 1950s to the mid-1970s, including during the Cultural Revolution. They were also available in other foreign languages. I also read these books during my school years in Shanghai.

⁵³¹ *ibid.*

Illustrated Monthly],⁵³² 《妇女》 [СОВЕТСКАЯ ЖЕННАИЩ, *Women*] and 《星火》 [ОГОНЁК, *Life*].⁵³³ Each edition included articles and reproductions of paintings, for example by artists of *The Wanderers* group, a nineteenth century Russian realist art movement,⁵³⁴ as well as student work from the Soviet art academies.⁵³⁵ These styles became models for Li's self-training in preparation for the entrance examination to an art academy. Armed with reproductions from magazines, gouache paints and books for developing skills in drawing and painting, Li diligently followed these texts closely to learn art techniques.

Li Shan had limited exposure to art training resources, relying mainly on official socialist realist art during his early years in northern China. In Lanxi County there was no place to learn colour theory, and copying master works from magazines was the only way for him to learn and develop his skills. With a fine instinct for colour, Li was able to mix all colours in the spectrum to achieve the desired results in his paintings. He was sensitive, or even obsessive, about brush work, the marks and the relationship of one brush stroke to another. During the year of preparation for the university entry examination he produced a portfolio that included three pencil drawings from the plaster relief of the Voltaire bust and a number of gouache paintings copied from the Soviet magazines. In contrast to Zhang Jianjun (Chapter 3) and Yu Youhan (Chapter 5) who both grew up in Shanghai, Li Shan did not have the same access to modernist art and information on art during his early years.

In 1964 students from Heilongjiang Province planning to study art, were limited to places offered by the The Central Academy of Drama, the STA, the People's Liberation Army Academy of Art, and several art departments in teacher training universities in China. The intake for art students was small, and consequently it was a highly competitive entrance examination. Li went through the Art Study Entry Examinations which consisted of two components: the art practice and academic study of general subjects at a high school

⁵³² The Chinese edition does not include the Russian title.

⁵³³ Printed materials from the West were forbidden in public in China during the 1960s and 1970s.

⁵³⁴ The *Wanderers* (*Peredvizhniki*, Russian: Передвѣжники) is best known in China as the Xun Hui Hua Pai 巡回画派 that represents the Russian realist art movement of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century with leading artists such as Ilya Repin, Vasily Surikov, Ivan Kramskoi, and Isaac Levitan, etc. (See related information on the influence of Soviet socialist realism art influence in China in the Introduction of this thesis footnote 56.) Li Shan's experience illustrates the strong influence in art from the Soviet Union in northern China in the early 1960.

⁵³⁵ In China the best known of the Russian art academies was the Sulikefu Meishu Xueyuan 苏里科夫美术学院 (Moscow Academy of Art/Surikov Art Institute in Moscow, in Russian: Московская государственная академия искусств и.н.Суриков). (See related discussion in Introduction under the subheading "The Modernist Art Movement"; and Chapter 1 under the subheading "The matrix of art institutions and organisations."

graduate level. The art practice component involved two examinations in drawing and painting. Li finished with an outstanding result and a top ranking.

The examination process highlighted for Li Shan the power and influence of political ideology in art. The subject of foreign faces or figures were no longer permitted as models for public art examinations in the early 1960s. The examination required students to draw a plaster facial cast of a Chinese worker with light sources from multiple directions. Until then Li had only practiced using the Voltaire sculpture in a controlled light source environment used in academic drawing. However, Li was aware that to get into art school he would need to meet the requirement of using natural lighting and presenting positive images of the proletarian revolutionary spirit in the socialist realism style.⁵³⁶

His ambition to study art was matched by where he wanted to study.⁵³⁷ Shanghai was the attraction and the STA.⁵³⁸ As Li explained, the modern image of Shanghai had been with him since his early childhood:

In my home town, people would buy a New Year folk painting to put on the wall in their house to celebrate Chinese New Year. My father bought one entitled “Shanghai’s Great World” (大世界) when I was just starting to be able to recognize different pictures.⁵³⁹ I examined it almost every day.... It was like a slide show that contained everything in it: fascinating architecture, local opera or acrobat performances with monkeys, Western fashions together with the Chinese traditional long robes (马褂) and qipao (旗袍), bicycles and cars, etc. [...] This was my image of Shanghai as a very young child. [...] with a young heart that wanted to fly high and far away to a strange place. To me, [Shanghai] was not so strange because I had been familiar with it from early childhood. I have yearned for it, its mystery and richness.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁶ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan’s studio, (Shanghai: October 2011).

⁵³⁷ In a personal note to Lansheng Zhang, Li acknowledged a “闯荡精神” [the spirit of following your dream and moving from place to place] that he inherited from the family history as the family’s roots were in north-west Gansu 甘肃 but then they moved to Shandong 山东 and then to Lanxi in the north-east. (A hand-written note from Li Shan to Lansheng Zhang on November 12, 2018.)

⁵³⁸ See Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan’s studio, (Shanghai: October 2011).

⁵³⁹ The *Great World* (大世界) is an entertainment complex located in the city centre of Shanghai. Built in 1917 on the corner of Avenue Edward VII (now Yan'an Road) and Yu Ya Ching Road (now Middle Xizang Road). When it was established it was the largest entertainment complex in East Asia, and the most popular indoor amusement arcade in Shanghai during the first half of the twentieth century. See further information on the history of *Great World* at <http://www.archives.sh.cn/shjy/shzg/201701/t20170104_43084.html>, viewed on 27 May 2017; <<http://chinese posters.net/themes/great-world-shanghai.php>>, accessed on 10th July 2013.

⁵⁴⁰ See Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan’s studio, Shanghai, October 2011. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

The Influence of Modernism and the Pursuit of Freedom in Artistic Expression

Li Shan was accepted into the STA in 1964 to study in the Department of Stage Design. Li's formal art education therefore was based on the Soviet model of art education adopted in China. However, from the beginning, he was more influenced by his association with modernists in Shanghai. This parallel set of conflicting ideas for Li as a young art student led him into trouble in his first-year programme. This time it was his art that was the problem. Following course requirements to produce works outside the class, Li painted a landscape from memory in an expressive style with bright and strong colours. A shared studio space was available for students to hang their works and classmate Wang Bangxiong 王邦雄 decided to hang the landscape painting. On a regular inspection of student studios, the Department Party Secretary, the Head of Department and the class-supervisor noted Li's work and immediately criticised it as being infected by bourgeois ideology. Li recalled how he was summoned to the office for a special consultation, and questioned why the trees were painted in certain colours and the clouds in strange shapes. The officials from the STA considered it to be a serious matter that the bourgeois ethos from pre-communist Shanghai had manifested itself in the thinking of a country boy who had been at the STA in Shanghai for only a short period. The criticism was fierce, politically charged, and conducted publicly to prevent other students from following in the same path. It was, in Li's own words, "like being hit on the head or having a bucket of cold water poured over my body (in winter)."⁵⁴¹ His art journey, begun after quitting study at Heilongjiang University to pursue his passion for art in a free and creative sphere, was shattered by the public humiliation of this incident. A political shadow had now been cast over Li's artistic career.

In previous chapters, I have discussed STA staff members who had an association with the early twentieth-century modernists in Shanghai. Min Xiwen 闵希文, for example, was a modernist and student of the older generation modernist artist Guan Liang from Shanghai. Although Min had been purged during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, from the 1960s he worked in the art department library.⁵⁴² An important way of gaining knowledge for many STA art students like Li was to spend time in the art department library outside of class time. Although information on Western art was forbidden and most of the materials publicly available related only to Soviet and Chinese socialist realist art, the opportunity to read art books on modernism, secretly passed under the table by Min, was inspirational for Li in the

⁵⁴¹ See Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, Shanghai, October 2011. This incident is imprinted in Li's memory where he recalls clearly the time of the criticism - September 1964 just after he started at the STA. The original Chinese text: "当头一棒或者说是从头到脚浇了一桶凉水." English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁴² Min Xiwen is discussed previously in Chapter 3 under the subheading "The Modernist Influence."

mid 1960s and for Zhang Jianjun in the late 1970s.⁵⁴³ Min's actions were an extraordinary gift to the student life of Li and others. Li has stated how this experience impacted on him:

I was very moved; this can never be forgotten. I could as a result see impressionist, indeed some post-impressionist, works through those books and periodicals in 1964. This was equivalent to the STA giving me great wealth, because at that time the library was rich with art books and periodicals that had been ordered before liberation (1949) in the 1930s and 40s. [...] for example, one work that has left a deep impression: a car goes over the surface of a road leaving tyre marks. I'm not sure whether it was drawn or photographed by the artist, but it had been made into a work of modern art. This kind of work was very stimulating to us, leading our views of art to undergo great changes. We had to think about what (kind of art) to do in the classroom? What were Western artists doing, what were we doing?⁵⁴⁴

Like others of his generation of art students during the Cultural Revolution, Li Shan and his classmates and teachers were sent to the countryside close to Shanghai for "re-education." He learned to conceal his beliefs in order to survive, as he put it, "Otherwise, not only my art career, but also my physical body might not exist."⁵⁴⁵ Li and his colleagues were able to return to Shanghai in 1970. Their graduation was suspended until 1972 and Li was offered a job at STA to teach after his graduation.

Between 1970 and 1973, Li produced a body of works in a modernist style behind closed doors in his studio. During his study at the STA, Li revered the avant-gardist Marcel Duchamp whose art he had encountered from discreet reading in the library.⁵⁴⁶ As noted previously, during the Cultural Revolution most books, except those containing the Party's

⁵⁴³ See Gao Minglu, "Interview by Jane DeBevoise and Anthony Yung," AAA, Beijing, 17 March 2009. <https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/gml-ft-final.pdf>, viewed 05 October 2010. Gaining access to information on Western literature and art was fully restricted across China. This is discussed in the Introduction under the subheading "The Spirit of Individualism in the Chinese Modern and Contemporary Art Context."

⁵⁴⁴ Li Shan, "Interview by Wen Zijian," AAA, Shanghai, 04 March 2009). <https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/lis-ft-final.pdf>, viewed 05 October 2010. The original quotation in Chinese: "我非常感激, 我是永生难忘的。所以, 除了印象派, 包括印象派以后的一些作品, 我在 64 年通过书刊都能够看到。这也是戏剧学院给予我的一种幸运, 因为当时戏剧学院图书馆的资料是非常丰富的, 都是解放前三、四十年代进来的一些书刊。所以, 64 年我会看到西方的现代主义的作品, 比如说, 我印象很深的一张作品: 一个汽车轮胎轧过一个路面, 然后留有轮胎的痕迹。我不知道当时艺术家是把它绘制出来的还是作为照片把它拍下来的, 然后就作为一幅现代作品。像这样的作品给我们的刺激都是很大的, 使我们的艺术观发生极大的变化, 我们不得不思考, 我在课堂里面做的是什​​么? 西方的艺术家已经在做什么了, 我们在做什么了?" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁴⁵ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang.

⁵⁴⁶ In an interview with Li Shan, Biljana Ciric asked who his idol was. Li replied: "High school period was Leonardo Da Vinci, and University period was Marcel Duchamp." See in Biljana Ciric, *History in the Making*, p.177. The discreet reading in the library is referring to Li's experience in STA library with Min Xiwen discreetly passing officially banned books under the table.

communist propaganda, were forbidden, including books on scientific developments. Li's pursuit of freedom in artistic expression landed him in trouble again in 1973. There was a politically motivated art exhibition of purged works *Black Painting Exhibition* 黑画展 that was staged by the Gang of Four to attack the Premier, Zhou Enlai 周恩来 who had been a supporter of those artists during the Cultural Revolution. The exhibition was held in Beijing, Shanghai and Xian in 1973 to display publically examples of the infestation of Western bourgeois ideology aimed to oppose the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁴⁷ The *Black Painting Exhibition* in Shanghai showed works of local artists including Li Shan, and held at the Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery.⁵⁴⁸ Li Shan was included in the exhibition as he had been criticised by STA officials for neglecting the official education policy of giving priority to party politics over teaching and art practice. University officials confiscated Li's artworks from the campus studio and selected 28 pieces from Li's works, together with the works of other staff, as examples of black painting to display on campus. Then two from those 28 works as well as the works of his teacher Hu Ruosi 胡若斯 and other Shanghai artists whose works were also blacklisted, were included in the *Black Painting Exhibition*. One of Li's landscape paintings of a rural pig farm was criticized for using bright colours influenced by impressionism and for unrealistically depicting country life and turning it into a "bourgeois life style" or a "palace of capitalism."⁵⁴⁹ (Figure 73.) As a university art teacher, Li became one of major targets of criticism for his bad influence on young students. He was suspended from teaching and sent

⁵⁴⁷ Wu Jijin, "The beginning and end of the criticism campaign by 'Gang of Four' on 'Black Painting'" ("四人帮" 批 "黑画" 运动始末), in *Shucheng* no.8 (2008); Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang. In 1973 there was fierce political in-fighting within the Party leadership led by Mao's wife Jiang Qing. The political campaign "Criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius (批林批孔)" in 1974 was aimed at Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来. There is a large volume of literature on this part of Chinese history, for example: Gerald Tannebaum, *The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (Hong Kong: Eastern Horizon Press, 1969); Simon Leys, *Les Habits neufs du président Mao: chronique de la Revolution culturelle* (Paris: Editions Champ libre, 1971); Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949–1984* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998); Merle Goldman and Leo Ou-fan Lee, eds. *An intellectual history of modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). *Histoire de Shanghai*©Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2002 (In French); Geremie R. Barmé, "Uncivil war Forty years ago this month, Mao Zedong unleashed a million Red Guards against the Communist Party - and heralded the start of the Cultural Revolution," *The Financial Times* (2006-08-26): 28; Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution : a history* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jeff Hay, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2012); Zhiyue Bo, *The history of modern China* (Philadelphia: Mason Crest Publishers, 2013).

⁵⁴⁸ Li Shan confirmed with me on 30 May 2019 that he no longer has any record nor can he remember the details of the works that were confiscated.

⁵⁴⁹ After the exhibition, all the exhibits vanished immediately, not into the Art Museum, not into the hands of organisations or institutions, and not returned to the artists. Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang.

to a re-education camp (五七干校) on a pig farm for about six months but resumed teaching soon after as the campaign did not last long because it did not have Mao's endorsement.⁵⁵⁰

Change came with the official end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, and as Li Shan described it: "The country's door opened a little gap with an in-coming breath of fresh air, a ray of sunshine."⁵⁵¹ Such a description can be applied to both the political and the cultural conditions of that time in China. Li was then able publicly to access books, catalogues, magazines, journals, films and videos related to both Chinese traditional thought and Western ideas, including modernist art. A period of historical retrospective thinking that was also intellectually outward looking pervaded the arts and cultural scene and brought the country into the mode of Cultural Fever in the early 1980s.⁵⁵² This was an important period



Figure 73. Li Shan, *Evening*, 1964. Gouache on paper, 20 x 28.5 cm.

for artists, represented by a large inflow of information and materials on Western modern philosophies and art theories. The manner and the way that knowledge was reflected in the work of artists is discussed in my case studies of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, and Yu Youhan.

In the beginning of the 1980s, artists across China were searching for new art forms or languages of artistic expression and some found inspiration in Chinese traditional culture. A

⁵⁵⁰ Li Hui, "Tracing the beginning and end of the 'Black Painting incident'" (追寻“黑画事件”始末), in *Shucheng* no.8 (2008); Li Shan, "Interview by Wen Zijian," *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990* (Hong Kong: AAA, 2009). <www.china1980s.org/files/interview/lsftfinal_201105091421584336.pdf>, viewed 05 October 2010.

⁵⁵¹ Li Shan, "Interview by Wen Zijian." The original Chinese text: "[...]文革结束了，我们的大门已经开了一个缝，有阳光和新鲜的空气进来。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁵² See a related in-depth discussion on the Cultural Fever in Introduction as well as in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

trip to explore ancient rock art in Jiangjunya 将军涯 in Jiangsu province by Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun in 1979 had a significant impact on both their art. (Figure 74.) Unlike Zhang, who had a period of disillusionment after a trip to Dunhuang Grotto in 1979,⁵⁵³ Li's visit to Jiangjunya resulted in a shift in his art from a mix of naive and expressionistic style paintings produced in late 1970s called the *Primeval* series (初始), (Figure 75.) to more abstract paintings titled the *Extension* series (扩延系列).⁵⁵⁴ Li's interest and romanticising of the ancient state of humans began to merge with mysticism from Eastern philosophy.⁵⁵⁵



Figure 74. The Jiangjunya 将军涯 ancient rock art.

In the *Primeval* series, images of ancient human figures, and animals in a timeless “absurd” environment,⁵⁵⁶ had traces of the naive style of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century paintings of the French artist Henri Rousseau. Li's style combined simple flat depictions of subjects, with expressive emotions, and naive and expressionistic styles. Li stated in an interview: “I believe that paying attention to primal instincts is very important for artists,” and that “the artwork that we see is often an artificial construct that has been carefully refined by the artist.”⁵⁵⁷ Wu Liang's analysis of this period offers a further insight

⁵⁵³ See the discussion of Zhang Jianjun's response to the Dunhuang visit in Chapter 3.

⁵⁵⁴ The *Primeval* series in Chinese 初始系列 has been translated in English as “Start/ Begin,” “Primal Beginnings” series, “Origin” series, and “Aborigines” in various materials. The *Extension* series in Chinese 扩延系列 has been also translated in English as “Extend/Expend” in some materials.

⁵⁵⁵ Wu Liang, “Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged,” P.40. This article was first published in a discontinued art magazine *Yishu Fengchao* [Art Trend] in Taiwan in beginning of the 1990.

⁵⁵⁶ Qian Ping, “True, confused choice: Enlightenment from Li Shan's Paintings,” (真实, 困惑的选择 – 观李山画的启示) in *Visual Art* (1987): 1-2. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁵⁷ Heather Russell, “Q & A with Chinese Contemporary artist Li Shan: on political pop art and the cultural role of the artist in China.”



Figure 75. Li Shan, *Primeval series* 《初始》, 1982.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 53.5 cm.

into Li's art at this time: "I think this is Li Shan's self-awareness on the rational level. In his subconscious mind, there must be hidden, more complex and contradictory connotations."⁵⁵⁸ These visual expressions progressively transformed into abstract mask-like images, with strong colours and mysterious symbols, resulting in a sense of ritual ceremony related to the nature of mankind and universe.

The early works of the *Extension* series created between 1982 and 1983 were a departure for Li Shan from his modernist-inspired style. (Figure 76.) His use of a dominant brown or black colour began as a background reminiscent of rock art colours. The white colour lines could be referenced from the lines marked on rock art but were executed in expressive brush strokes. Some critics related Li's mask-like images to symbols from ancient bronzes.⁵⁵⁹ I argue the inspiration for these works was from ancient rock art Li Shan had seen at Jiangjunya.

⁵⁵⁸ Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged," p.40.

⁵⁵⁹ In the publication on the '85 Movement, Gao and co-authors commented: "As early as 1980, Li Shan adopted expressionism and abstract expressionism in his *Abstract I* and *Abstract II* oil paintings. By appropriating a symbolic language from ancient bronzes "script" in those works, [Li] has successfully explored Eastern abstract expressionism." (See Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.217).



Figure 76. Li Shan, *Extension* series 《扩延系列》, 1983. Oil on canvas.

Wu Liang and Gao Minglu have suggested that Li's experimentation with abstraction in his search of a new visual language, infused with an Eastern mystical and philosophical spirit, was critical to the works in the *Extension* series.⁵⁶⁰ In the *Extension* series paintings, an abstract large dark circle (curved or round object) with a fuzzy hairy edge is the prominent visual symbol. (Figure 77) The dark circles occupy a large space on the canvas in a cramping composition that confronts the viewer. Geometric shapes also appeared in some of the paintings, dividing the image and creating different visual perspectives. The paintings, largely in black and white, often included a shade of blue or an earthy brown colour.



Figure 77. Li Shan, *Extension* series 《扩延系列》, 1984. Oil on canvas, 59 x75 cm.

⁵⁶⁰ See Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged," p.40; Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.217-218.

The symbolic images of Li's work in this series have been linked by observers to the concept of an embryo or referred to as a male testicle by Li's close circle of friends.⁵⁶¹ Critics have suggested that the primary concern in Li Shan's art after the late 1970s was the condition of "life."⁵⁶² The embryo-like images from the *Extension* series could be interpreted as a symbol of life and vitality. Gao and his co-authors suggested that it "not only expressed a microscopic representation of the origin and development (expansion and continuation) of life, but also a macroscopic abstraction."⁵⁶³ This assertion implies the images in this series could be viewed either as an object or an abstract concept. They articulated Li's conceptual approach eloquently in the genre of the "rational" and "Eastern spirit" that belonged, as already noted, to the "Tide of Rational [Painting]." They have also noted the link to the Eastern philosophical concepts of mutual creation as the "being and nothingness" (有无相生) and the "cyclical regeneration" (周而复始).⁵⁶⁴

My research shows a common feature of the intellectual journey of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, and Yu Youhan from the end of the 1970s through to 1981. Throughout this period these artists searched Western classical and modern, and ancient Eastern philosophies, to find new directions for their artistic expression. This process, I propose, raised a deeper consciousness of Eastern philosophical expressions which is reflected in their art.⁵⁶⁵ An

⁵⁶¹ See Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged," p.41; Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.218. For reference to a male testicle, See Wu Liang, *Conversation with Li Shan, Zhang Huang and Wu Liang*, 2004. Shanghart Gallery website. <<http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/40>>, accessed on 07/2010; Zhao Chuan, *The Story of Shanghai Abstraction [Art]*.

⁵⁶² Qian Ping interpreted Li's *Primeval* series in 1987: "[...] The world is made up of lives, and all lives are like oneself in having awareness and soul. Human and non-human are indistinguishable and inseparable" [世界是由生命组成的，而一切生命都和自己一样是有知有灵的，人和非人是无界限差别的，是不可分离的。] Wu Liang commented on the *Extension* series in 1990: "These balls are like a living soft embryo constantly expanding there." [这些圆球像是一种有生命的软体胚胎，在那儿不断膨胀。] Gao Minglu and co-authors stated: "Here, he highlights a simple "life symbol" - a fluffy "circle" suspended in an unknown space." [在这里，他突出了简括的"生命符号" - 悬浮在一个未知空间中的毛茸茸的"圆"。] (See in Qian Ping, "真实，困惑的选择——观李山画的启示" ["Real, Perplexed Choices - Enlightenment from Viewing Li Shan's Paintings"], in *Visual Art* (1987): 2; Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged," P.41; Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.217. English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁶³ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.217-218. The original Chinese text: "这个符号的成功之处在于它既是对生命源起、发展（扩张、延续）的微观具象的表现，同时又是一种宏观的抽象[...]" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁶⁴ *ibid*.

⁵⁶⁵ Developing new artistic concepts in contemporary Chinese art by adopting both East and West philosophical ideas has been addressed by many scholars, for example, see in Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On*

acknowledgement of this source of inspiration appears in the early writings about Li Shan's art by Qian Ping, Wu Liang, and Gao Minglu. Li Shan's interests, however, extended beyond philosophical and cultural ideas, to new ideas in science and reflected his continuing interest in mathematics and science since primary school. This interest was manifested in his later *Reading series* from the mid 1990s onwards.⁵⁶⁶

In the book *The '85 Movement*, Gao Minglu and his co-authors argued that the range of reading materials by Li Shan and others led to a propensity to produce "rational painting" and went further to explain "In fact, in terms of artistic thought, most artists from the 'Tide of Rational [Painting]' emphasise intuitive and Eastern thinking."⁵⁶⁷ They considered the "trend of rational thought" [理性思潮], reflecting on the three themes of "Humanistic Rationality," "Ontological Rationality," and "Thinking Rationality," was the most influential in the '85 Art New Wave.⁵⁶⁸ Gao and co-authors went on to suggest that "Ontological Rationality," which consists of the schools of "religious reason" [宗教理性], "philosophical reason" [哲理理性], and "objective reason" [客观理性] is where Shanghai avant-garde artists are best placed in the narrative of "rational thought."⁵⁶⁹ The Shanghai avant-garde artists were identified as a "non-group" and their art was categorised as falling into the philosophical school.⁵⁷⁰ Gao and co-authors perceived the "Tide of Rational [Painting]" as emerging "from 1985"; however, I contend that Shanghai artists such as Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, and Yu Youhan had been producing art in this genre from the beginning of the 1980s. In chronological terms, this form of artistic expression occurred amongst the

Contemporary Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); John Clark, ed. "Open and Closed Discourse of Modernity in Asian Art," *Modernity in Asian Art* (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993); Caroline Turner, ed. *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, ANU, 2005); Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting, 1949-1986* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1987); Francesca Dal Lago, "The voice of the 'superfluous' people: painting in China in the 1980s and 1990s," in *Writing on the wall: Chinese new realism and avant-garde in the eighties and nineties* et al. Cees Hendrikse, Thomas Burghuis, and Groninger Museum (London: Groninger Museum, 2008), pp.21-32.

⁵⁶⁶ At that time there was a major shift in Li's art practice into the BioArt. See footnote 105 on Li's definition of BioArt.

⁵⁶⁷ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.157. The original Chinese text: "事实上, 在艺术思维方面, '理性之潮' 的画家们大都强调直觉思维, 且大都强调东方思维, [...]" See the definition of the "Tide of Rational [Painting]" from Gao and co-authors in footnotes 159, 522.

⁵⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 154-157. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 152-249. Under the theme of Ontological Rationality, the different schools were identified as the "Religious Rationality" represented by the work of the artists from "Northern Art Group" (北方艺术群体) in city of Changchun 长春 such as Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, and Ding Fang; the "Philosophical Rationality" represented by the work of Ren Jie, Liu Yan (from Northern Art Group), and Xu Lei from "Red Brigade" (红色旅) art group in Nanjing; and Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, and Yu Youhan in Shanghai (non group); the "Objective Rationality" represented by the work from Zhang Peili, Gen Jianyi, and Song Ling 宋陵 from the "Chishe" (池社) art group as well as Wu Shanzhuan 吴山专 from Hangzhou.

Shanghai avant-garde artists some four to five years earlier than Gao and co-authors have classified in their publication. Gao and co-authors failed to acknowledge this chronology in the context of writing a national art discourse. I argue that Li Shan and other Shanghai avant-garde artists laid the groundwork for the development of this genre in the lead up to the '85 Art New Wave movement in China. However, this important role of Shanghai artists has not been recognised in the discourse of contemporary Chinese art.

While the Shanghai artists experimented with new artistic languages during the 1980s, they also produced work switching between figurative and abstract styles. The political conditions also impacted variations in their art production as the environment was still restricted by the Party's directives. Li Shan together with Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen and other like-minded artists experimented from the late 1970s with their practice to dissociate their art from the political discourse and distance themselves from the official socialist realist art.⁵⁷¹ From 1982 to 1985 these artists produced mainly abstract works in black and white in stark contrast to the propaganda style that demanded paintings to reflect proletarian ideas and be brightly coloured.⁵⁷²

In the Introduction, I defined the word "experiment" or "experimental" as used in this thesis to describe the art practices of Shanghai avant-garde artists in the 1980s with the context of the political environment at that time in China. The events surrounding the *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: The Stage 1983*, an artist-organised event initiated by leading avant-garde artists, mostly affiliated with the STA, including Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun, highlights this highly-controlled environment.⁵⁷³ In this exhibition Li's *Extension* series was first exposed to the public; however, it was short-lived because of the official censorship.⁵⁷⁴ The impact on the local artistic discourse was powerful, and the response from the authorities was forceful. Li's works together with the works of Zhang Jianjun and some other participating artists, were heavily criticised by the official media. These

⁵⁷¹ See Zhao Chuan, *The Story of Shanghai Abstract [Art]*. I have also discussed this issue in the Introduction as well as in Chapter 1.

⁵⁷² See Ellen Avril, "The art of China's Cultural Revolution," Johnson Museum of Art, (Cornell University, 2009), <<https://museum.cornell.edu/exhibitions/art-chinas-cultural-revolution>>, viewed 25 March 2019. In the introduction, the curator Ellen Avril stated: "Everything changed during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. Forced to serve political and propaganda purposes under enormous pressure from guidelines of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, led by Mao's fourth wife Jiang Qing, works of art were expected to foment revolution and, in her words, be 'red, bright, and shining' (*hong, guang, liang*), like Jiang Qing's revolutionary operas." See a previous discussion on the Cultural Revolution propaganda art style in Chapter 1, footnote 186.

⁵⁷³ This exhibition is discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

⁵⁷⁴ See a detailed discussion of the *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: The Stage 1983* and on official censorship in Chapter 1 under the subheading "The Critical Early Unofficial Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in the 1980s."

criticisms linked the exhibition with Western modernist philosophy and labelled it “bourgeois spiritual pollution.”⁵⁷⁵

Three years later after the dust of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign had settled, Min Xiwen 闵希文 published an article in the Shanghai journal *Life Collections* 《生活从刊》 where he praised the ten young artists involved in the *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: The Stage 1983* for their “enormous bravery” embarking on this project. Min firmly believed these experimental artists were expressing “new aesthetic ideals” and the “Eastern” temperament of the new art style.⁵⁷⁶ In the same year the art columnist Huang Shi 黄石 wrote in the *Shanghai Culture and Art Newspaper* that the action to “break away from the self-limitation in art” in this exhibition was well ahead of developments taking place in the rest of the country, noting it was two years later that the ‘85 Art New Wave movement emerged.⁵⁷⁷ Huang argued the officially controlled art criticism in Shanghai undervalued the importance of this exhibition and called for a re-evaluation of its significance.⁵⁷⁸ Nonetheless, Min and Huang’s evaluation of this exhibition did not fully take into account contemporary art discourse at the national level. For example, in the critical writing published in 1991 on the 1980s art movements in China, Gao Minglu and his co-authors provided their assessment on both the 1979 *Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition* and the *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: The Stage 1983*. They commented: “While in today’s (early 1990s) terms the content and the form of art in these exhibitions might not be considered avant-garde, ...taking the specific temporal and spatial background into account, this should be called a prelude to a series of exploratory exhibitions around 1985, its contribution to which can’t be denied.”⁵⁷⁹ This assessment of “not so avant-garde”, I argue, negates the fundamentals of an avant-garde action undertaken by artists during a period of tense political repression where control over an individual’s artistic pursuit is paramount. From available documents and resources, my research has found that this exhibition broke new ground in both content and form thus qualifying as avant-garde in introducing new

⁵⁷⁵ See related discussion on the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in Chapter 1 and 3.

⁵⁷⁶ Min Xiwen, “The art of progress in the experiment: a recounting of the Ten Persons Exhibition,” *Experimental Works Documentation Set*, Shanghai Pictorial Publishing House, 2004, p.11.

⁵⁷⁷ Huang Shi was one of a few newspaper journalists in Shanghai who reported the avant-garde art local activities in the 1980s. See also related discussion in Chapter 1.

⁵⁷⁸ *ibid.* See Huang Shi, “Active Shanghai art needs to come out of the shadows,” Shanghai Pictorial Publishing House, 2004, p.12.

⁵⁷⁹ Gao Minglu, et al. *The ‘85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), p.205. The original quotation in Chinese: “虽然其作品内容、形式在今日看来大概算不上前卫,然而老虑到其特定的时空背景,应当说是1985年前后一系列探索倾向的展览的前奏,功不可没。” English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

ideas and artistic approaches.⁵⁸⁰ The pioneer status of the *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: The Stage 1983* is upheld in terms of its timing within the chronological development of contemporary Chinese art. Gao and his co-authors' assessment of the role of Shanghai avant-garde artists in the national art discourse has been displaced and obscured through the rhetoric of the '85 New Wave art movement. I have argued this position at length in Chapter 1 and elsewhere in this thesis.

The *Experimental Paintings Exhibition: The Stage 1983* was also significant in Li's artistic career as it had been ten years since his work was blacklisted in 1973 and, as a result, he had been unable to show his artworks in public during that period. In a statement from Li and other participating artists printed in the exhibition pamphlet, he reflects on the experimental spirit in art practice and philosophical state of mind of the artist. He stated: "What comes around goes around, all is process."⁵⁸¹ It showed also his political astuteness in making a statement, without a subject, that allowed him to escape from political punishment when the exhibition was terminated by the officials shortly after it opened.⁵⁸²

The *Extension Series*, that followed the *Primeval Series*, was the prime focus of Li's art through most the 1980s. In the middle of the 1980s, Li also worked on his *Order series* (秩序系列) that consisted of abstract paintings with a lattice-like structure of black lines on canvas forming graphical square boxes which he started in the 1979.⁵⁸³ In an interview with the production team of the "Art New Wave" TV programme in 1986,⁵⁸⁴ Li stated:

⁵⁸⁰ There has been extensive research on contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s including: the major research and archiving project *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990* by Asia Art Archive a Hong Kong based art organisation; and the critical research publication *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, was a collective effort involving international and local scholars, led by Wu Hung. [See *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, 2010. <<http://www.china1980s.org/en/about.aspx>>; Wu Hung, ed. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: MoMA, Duke University Press, 2010).]

⁵⁸¹ *10•20 Experimental Works Documentation Set*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Publishing House, 2004.) The original Chinese text: "来了又去了, 一切都是过程。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁸² Li Shan was questioned on the meaning of his statement by officials after the exhibition was terminated. Li replied: "it is simply as it is written that is all it is - a process." Thus, the officials could not prosecute him without any political evidence. Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, (Shanghai: October 2011).

⁵⁸³ Li Shan, "Interview by Wang Nanming," in exh cat. *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985* (Shanghai: Zendai MoMA, 2008), pp.59, 61.

⁵⁸⁴ The "Art New Wave" TV documentary programme was initiated by the editor and director Li Shaowu 李少武 from CCTV in early 1986. He invited Gao Minglu as the advisor and formed a filming crew including another five members. The production started from 1986 to 1987 travelling and interviewing individual artists and art groups. The materials were edited in 1990 by another editor/director Shi Xianfa and Gao Minglu wrote the script. It was not until June 2015 that this documentary programme was premiered simultaneously with the

Why would I adopt such a [lattice] symbol and use such black tones? Such symbols are in my view essentially both simple and ambiguous, both defined and indistinct, and they have essentially a mystical resonance. As for the colour black, some people find things in it that are repressed, frightening, severe, etc. But what I experience in it is simply mystical.⁵⁸⁵

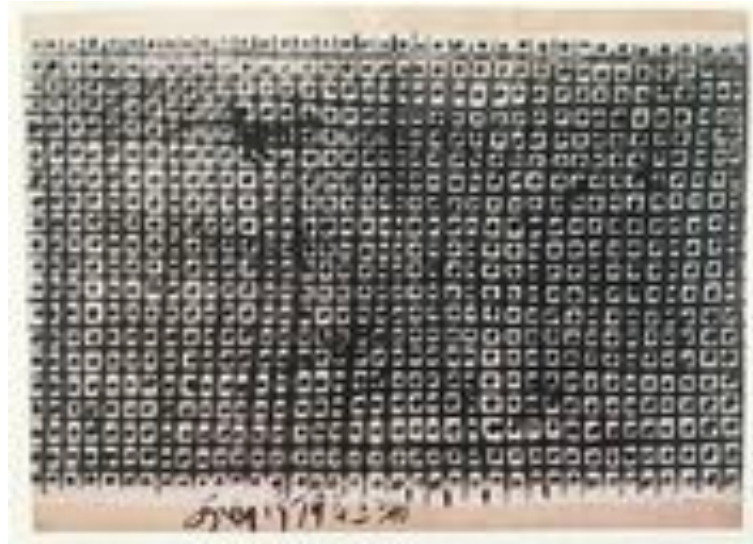


Figure 78. Li Shan, *Order* series, 1979. Ink on paper, 51 x 74 cm.

Despite the artist's description of a mystical experience of his own work, there is a sense of constraint in the structured lattice and a feeling of hopelessness emerging from the repetitive boxed-in round dots that come out clearly in images of the *Order* series. (Figure 78) It has been suggested by Gao and his co-authors that the black lines (lattice) and round chaps (dots) were influenced by early Russian suprematism.⁵⁸⁶ However, their assertion does not provide any evidence of a direct link to Russian influence. My research has found that Li had been exploring those symbolic elements in his image making from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and I will investigate the *Rouge* series (胭脂系列) to identify these

opening of the exhibition *The lonely horizon: Gao Minglu during the 1970s* at the Linda Gallery (林大艺术中心) in Beijing. (See Gao Minglu, *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), pp.608-633; 99 *Art News* (99yishuxinwen), "Gao Minglu's 1970s works showed at the Linda Gallery," <news.99ys.com/news/2015/0615/9_193772_1.shtml>, viewed 02 February 2017.

⁵⁸⁵ Gao Minglu, ed. *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University, 2008), p.622. The original text in Chinese: "我为什么要采用这样的符号和运用的一个黑颜色? 我认为这种符号本身呢, 既简单又含混, 既明确又模糊, 这本身就有神秘的意味在里面。那么黑颜色呢也是这样的, 有人在黑颜色中体会到的是压抑的东西, 恐怖的东西, 严厉的东西等等。而我呢, 在黑颜色中所体会到的只有神秘。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁸⁶ Russian suprematism was an abstract art movement developed by Kazimir Malevich and characterised by simple geometric shapes and associated with ideas of spiritual purity. See in Gao Minglu, "From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation," p.9.

elements. I contend that rather than being perceived as adopting an art form from the early Russian avant-garde art in the *Order* series, Li's creative process instead charted his personal experiences, feelings and thoughts in this period and summarised those into a simple repetitive formation. The works reflected closely the artist's state of mind and the socio-political conditions as a product of China of the 1980s. Later in the series, Li introduced a paradoxical element by adding various symbols or icons into the square boxes which indicated a change or something new waiting to be born in his art production.

To international and Chinese domestic audiences today, Li Shan's name and his art are usually associated with his iconic paintings from his *Rouge* series (1992) of Mao Zedong in the Chinese Red Army uniform with a feminine appearance, wearing red lipstick and with the stem of a flower between his lips. (figures 79.) After a period of involvement with activities that have been associated with the '85 Art New Wave movement (which will be discussed further later in this chapter), Li altered his artistic expression from the abstract form and returned to figurative paintings, starting in the *Rouge* series in early 1989 and shown in public for the first time in the same month as the Tiananmen Square incident on 4 June 1989.⁵⁸⁷ On his first viewing of Li's early *Rouge* series in an exhibition in the STA Gallery in June 1989, Wu Liang found those images were "manifestations of mixed political symbols"



Figure 79. Li Shan, *Rouge series: No.8*, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 105.4 x 147.3 cm.

⁵⁸⁷ Wu Liang, "Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged," pp.36-42. A recent article by Gao Minglu suggests the *Rouge* series could have started in 1988. He asserts: "Among Li Shan's works, the Rouge series has arguably garnered the most attention internationally, but this was not just work that only appeared after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident; he had actually been pursuing these ideas earlier. And not just Li Shan: Yu Youhan, Wang Guangyi and many of the later political pop artists from the end of 1980s — to be exact, from 1988 onward — had begun to create these kinds of artworks, which became widely popular in the early 1990s." [See Gao Minglu, "From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation," p.11.]

and “metaphorically referring to a historical moment” (coinciding with the Tiananmen Square incident). Hence, “they cannot rid themselves of politicised interpretation in a long-term and irrefutable manner” as their “fate” (命运).⁵⁸⁸

After the June Fourth incident,⁵⁸⁹ the environment for artists tightened politically to restrict any ideas outside the Party’s directives. The impetus towards economic reform was also overshadowed by the social and cultural developments. Avant-garde art activities were suppressed from public spaces and confined to private spaces or studios. One may describe the art world in China during this time as in a “cool-down” period in contrast to the mid 1980s explosion of dynamic cultural activities. For some, it was a time for intellectual recharging and turning to new ideas for inspiration. News of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent breakup of the former Soviet Union that filtered through official media channels after the Tiananmen Square incident, impacted Li. He and his peers experienced an extraordinary socio-political transformation in China — the tragedies were glossed over by rapid economic developments and commercial expansion. Li believes that in China or in any society “no one could be separated from politics.”⁵⁹⁰ He perceives that each step or incident in his own trajectory in pursuing his life in art is in one way or another linked to the political conditions of the times. He sees those conditions originating from or having been fuelled by the Chinese Communist Party and ultimately dictated by one person — Mao Zedong.⁵⁹¹

In the period from 1988 to 1990, a number of artists in Shanghai such as Yu Youhan⁵⁹² and Wang Ziwei 王子为 had started to borrow Mao’s image to use in their art. (Figure 80.) This new art genre was not confined to Shanghai but also occurred in other places in China. Their number included artists such as Wang Guangyi in Shenzhen 深圳 and Zhang Peili in Hangzhou, to name a few. It was a trend fast spreading all over China and joined with a social phenomenon of the time that saw Mao’s image used as an icon for all sorts of commercial products as well as portraying him as a mythic figure. It regenerated the image

⁵⁸⁸ Wu Liang, “八个艺术家的形象素描 [The Sketches of Eight Artists],” at <http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/artist/txt_ab/be1atC/06actytr>, viewed 25 March 2016. Wu has known Li Shan since 1983 and over the years has written numerous articles on Li Shan’s early 1980s work, as well as his later works including: “Li Shan: Changeable and Unchanged” and “A Road to the Rouge Empire” (通往胭脂帝国的道路), in *Artists in Studios* (Shanghai: Sanlian Book Store, 1997); “The story is the final winner,” (故事是最后的赢家) in 《上海文学》 [*Shanghai Literature*], 7. (2012): 71-73. Quoted original Chinese phrases: “夹杂着的政治符号彰显,” “隐喻意味的历史时刻,” “因此它们不容辩驳地、长期地不能摆脱政治化解释.” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁵⁸⁹ The terms “June Fourth incident” and “Tiananmen Square incident” are often used interchangeably.

⁵⁹⁰ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan’s studio, (Shanghai: October 2011).

⁵⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁵⁹² See the detail on Yu Youhan in Chapter 5.



Figure 80. Wang Ziwei, *Leader and Flags*, 1989. Oil on canvas, 79.3 x 189.5 cm.

of Mao. His image, together with key political events in China's Communist history and propaganda from the Cultural Revolution, were all transformed in popular culture in the new political-economic setting. Contemporary artists were in advance of this phenomenon.⁵⁹³ There are two main drivers for this new genre — the existing social and political conditions, and the developments of economic reform. The social response of the economic reform policy is more readily understood, but responding to the social and political environment is more complex. Critic Li Xianting who coined the term “Chinese Political Pop Art” articulated the “political” aspect of the art movement which later became known as political pop from a social and political perspective. He stated:

An existence saturated with politics has become the accustomed state of being for most contemporary Chinese: every person, (and particularly intellectuals), will consciously or unconsciously adjust his own position according to the changes in the political climate. Efforts to avoid this political reality, or even to adopt an alternative political stance to fight against it, are only further evidence of the power of the system. Political Pop uses the acknowledgement of this political reality as its starting point, but the proceeds to satirise politics, providing an effective (but by no means heroic) means of neutralizing the hold of a political saturated mentality on the inner mind.⁵⁹⁴

Li Xianting suggests that the phenomenon of the Mao image was a complex “social psychology” that affected the entire population during the time. It was reflected in a generation of artists' works by their use of past icons or “gods” to satirise current realities.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹³ See Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Examples that could be found at the time were tourist souvenirs with Mao's image and the Cultural Revolution propaganda slogans or posters such as key rings, cups and T-shirts or the small amulets hanging in the private cars of the local new rich.

⁵⁹⁴ Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in exh cat, *China's New Art, Post-1989* ed. Valerie C Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001), p.XXI.

⁵⁹⁵ *ibid.*

Artists at the time largely appropriated images of Mao and political propaganda in a typically Cultural Revolution style, reconstructing them with logos of popular commercial products to evoke public experiences comically or satirically as commentary or criticism on the present commercialised social and political situation in China. Li Shan pursued his own way of appropriating Mao's image drawn from his personal experience. He created an idiosyncratic relationship between Mao and himself. Born in 1942 and living through the campaigns in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, he had lived under Mao's image and its shadow for much of his life. Such political experiences in relation to the Mao factor are described by Li Shan as totally "personal."⁵⁹⁶ The meaning of "personal" in Li's *Rouge* series could be examined in two ways. The personal political experiences linked to a state of being; the other more obscure, being the personal intuitive and emotional resistance and refusal to conform under the generally accepted social framework of rules or the accepted value system.⁵⁹⁷ In Li Shan's view, those rules and the value system "are created by mankind itself." "Can they be altered?" he questioned, "Artists have a wish to change them." He also asked, "When will society accept the principles created by artists?"⁵⁹⁸

While Mao's image in Li's *Rouge* series was largely appropriated from political propaganda materials and recreated as Mao or Mao lookalike portraits, they had distinctive features such as Mao wearing bright coloured lipstick and a Chinese Red Army uniform or Mao suit.⁵⁹⁹ With symbolic lotus-like flowers added to the image, either attached to the figure or used in other ways, these works are distinguished by a very effeminate Mao. The main subject was rendered three dimensional by using light and shade. The background of the portraits painted in flat bright colours interchanging blue or pink in the series. The series clearly adopted the styles of commercial art or advertising billboard paintings that a viewer might find reminiscent of Andy Warhol's *From Mao Tse-Tung* series of images screen-printed

⁵⁹⁶ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang. Li made similar statement on different occasions, including in an interview with Biljana Ciric and Wen Zijian (AAA).

⁵⁹⁷ Li Shan, Interview by Davide Quadrio (BizART), 2007. < <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/813>>, viewed 04 January 2014. Davide Quadrio (Italian) is the founding director of BizART a non-profit art organisation in Shanghai since its inception in the beginning of 1998. In analysing this particular element in Li Shan's work, Karen Smith commented: "Where Li Shan stresses the importance of personal experience in his art, it would seem a plausible connection. However, although he introduced a wide range of symbolic images into his work, the allusions are not as complex as the interpretations subsequently read into them. It is the emotional impulse, always intuitively expressed, that lends the works its complexity." (See Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the birth of avant-garde art in new China*, p.242.)

⁵⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹⁹ What is often referred to as the Mao suit in the West, is known in China as the Zhongshanzhuang 中山装 [Sun Yat-sen suit].

on paper that Warhol produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Warhol employed a technique based on screen printing to eliminate expressive brush and paint marks which he said was “to completely remove all the hand gesture from art and become noncommittal, anonymous,”⁶⁰⁰ Li took an opposite approach, inserting the intimate personal mark of the brush stroke into his *Rouge* series. Traceable brush strokes like those in his earlier works were used on specific parts of the objects in the paintings. Airbrushing was also used to render the transition of shades on the portrait. It was a new technique or technology introduced into China in the early 1980s and was mostly used in commercial art productions such as advertisements on billboards and in graphic design in both printed and TV materials, packaging and product design artworks, before computers aided the designer. In the appropriation of iconic political images, Li stated that:

In fact, political figures in these works, are not about how interested I was in actual politics. However, I want it this way to raise questions: What are we about? What is our history about? What is our society about? My core purpose is to ask questions, to make us think, to make intellectuals think, to make common people think, and is not about politics itself. In my later works in the Rouge series containing Mao symbols, such as Mao Zedong in whose mouth there is the stem of [a]flower: this is to raise these questions: What is our political life about? What are we ourselves about? What is our history about? Questions like this.⁶⁰¹

The *Rouge* series consists of four main visual subjects: the “neither male nor female” figure,⁶⁰² the lotus flower; the Mao portraits; the butterfly or fish and animal bodies imprinted with patterns of lotus flowers or portraits of people. The lotus flower and the butterfly are key symbols that could lend themselves to variable interpretations.⁶⁰³ The male figures in earlier works of the series are depicted with exposed genitals turning into lotus-like flowers. For example, in the *Rouge A, B and C*, produced between 1989 and 1991 (Figures 81, 82, 83.) the scale of the three paintings average 140 cm high x 350 cm wide and are painted in the signature colours of a light blue background, red and white flowers, and dark grey figures. The figures and flowers occupy the centre of the canvases. The male figure

⁶⁰⁰ Tate Webpage, *Andy Warhol: Self-Portrait 1967*, at <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/warhol-self-portrait-t01288>>, viewed 06 November 2013.

⁶⁰¹ Li Shan, “Interview by Wen Zijian,” Chinese transcript p.11-14. The original quotation in Chinese: “其实在作品中用政治人物，倒不是说我对现实政治多么感兴趣，而是通过这样的方式，我要提出好多问题：我们怎么样了？我们的历史怎么样？我们的社会怎么样？我的核心目的就是要提问题，让我们自己来思考，让知识界来思考，让我们的平民百姓来思考，而不是政治本身。包括后来《胭脂》——有毛泽东符号的这样的作品，比如说，毛泽东叼一朵花，还是提出这些问题。我们的政治生活怎么样？我们本人怎么样？我们的历史怎么样？等等这些问题。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁶⁰² Gao Minglu, “From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan’s BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation,” p.7.

⁶⁰³ See Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the birth of avant-garde art in new China*.



Figure 81. Li Shan, *Rouge A*, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 140 x 258 cm.



Figure 82. Li Shan, *Rouge B*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 140 x 340 cm.



Figure 83. Li Shan, *Rouge C*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 140 x 365 cm.

in the *Rouge A* has his genitals depicted in a state of erection and transformed into a blossoming flower. His head is bent down and immersed in the flower. A frontal view of a youthful male figure in the painting *Rouge B* is holding two lotus flowers that stem out from his genitals symmetrically on both sides of his body. The body is depicted from the upper part of the knees to under the breast line. The head of the body is no longer important in this image. *Rouge C* has two male bodies, one young and one older, facing each other with their hands resting on each other's shoulders. Two lotus flowers again stem out of the backside of each body and occupy the left and right ends of the canvas. The level of

eroticism in the images is unmistakable. But at the same time, they are difficult for general viewers to understand and the visual symbol of the lotus creates ambiguous messages.

Referring to the multi-level meanings of the *Rouge* series, Gao Minglu has argued “Li Shan’s work is not really political pop, nor is it straightforward, despite its glaring poignancy and satirical political connotations.” He suggests that: “At a pictorial level, the *Rouge* series are of hermaphroditic figures in Chinese society. While ‘hermaphrodite’ refers to a person who has both male and female genitalia, northern Chinese reference ‘hermaphrodite’ as ‘neither male nor female.’ On a political level, it is a metaphor for aimless corruption in the government bureaucratic class.”⁶⁰⁴

The lotus flower in Chinese cultural traditions and in Buddhism holds a sacred position in the spiritual world, associated with beauty and moral values. However, the lotus with its stems of buds and flowers in a modern visual language also carries the attributes of vitality or sexuality. Karen Smith — a British writer and a long-term resident in Beijing — suggested in relation to the visual language in Li’s work: “The sexual allure of the Orient is mythical.” She probes deep into Chinese culture in an attempt to demystify it and offers two historical references. One is a reference of the lotus to a traditional woman’s “tiny, bound-feet,” which is often described as “a compendium of erotic sexual caprice.” The other is men or boys cross dressing and playing female roles in the traditional Chinese opera.⁶⁰⁵ This feature of using the lotus flower to create two meanings, a double-play effect, was carried through in the images of the early part of the *Rouge* series. This was most notable in a group of portraits of Mao where Chairman Mao was portrayed with an effeminate appearance, wearing lipstick and holding a stem of a lotus flower in his mouth. However, according to some, Li was opposed to people reading those portraits as symbols of ridicule, political dissent and irony.⁶⁰⁶ On another occasion, he reiterated the difference between Chinese political pop art and Western pop Art, but indicated he did not mind being labelled a political pop art artist.⁶⁰⁷ In an interview conducted by Heather Russell in 2013, Li Shan stated that “concepts like ‘effeminate’ and ‘unisex’ are unique in China because defining them falls into a cultural grey zone” and “can’t be easily explained in black and white terms.” This creates an interesting environment for artists to express emotions including “melancholy and

⁶⁰⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁵ Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the birth of avant-garde art in new China*, p.252.

⁶⁰⁶ Wu Liang, *Conversation of Li Shan, Zhang Huang and Wu Liang*, 2004. Shanghart Gallery website. < <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/40>>, viewed July 2010.

⁶⁰⁷ See in Heather Russell, “Q & A with Chinese Contemporary Artist Li Shan: on political pop art and the cultural role of the artist in China.” (Heather Russell was the Senior Specialist, Post-War & Contemporary Art, artnet auctions & Private Sales at the artnet Auction.)

ambiguity.” Using the image of Mao in his paintings, Li Shan has described this as “a cultural symbol.”⁶⁰⁸

The *Rouge* series and its characterisation as part of the art of political pop has been well documented since the series came into public viewing after 1989.⁶⁰⁹ The equivocal language of sexuality in Li’s work from the 1980s, has not been dealt with sufficiently in the art discourse and in academic studies.⁶¹⁰ Smith is among the few writers who highlights the subject of sexuality in Li Shan’s art within a cultural and political context. She states: “Mao serves as a visual decoy, permitting Li Shan to explore an “otherness” in human nature — whether that is specifically homosexual or not, is left to the individual to determine and to debate.”⁶¹¹ It needs to be understood that showing such suggestive images in public had been forbidden in the arts and in cultural productions since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Expressing one’s emotions relating to sexuality was viewed by the Party as the “糟粕” (dregs), a derogatory term often used in the Party’s propaganda. The regime used genetic studies for their political means “where homosexual inclinations were ascribed to a genetic flaw” and deemed as “contrary to the advance of a healthy socialist society.”⁶¹² In this context, Smith suggests that Li Shan’s interest in genetics in the 1980s “has to be seen in the context of the State’s propaganda on eugenics.” This issue will be discussed later in the chapter.⁶¹³ As the subject of sexuality was culturally and politically sensitive in China even in the 1980s, writings on this subject have been cautious and subtle language employed. Towards the end of the 1980s the government loosened its rules on this matter by taking an ambiguous approach without a clear policy change. My research finds the images related to the subject of sexuality in Li’s art emerged at the beginning of the 1980s.⁶¹⁴ In light of the social and political conditions at the time, such a contentious subject in Li’s art practice, I argue, was an avant-garde act at a time when no

⁶⁰⁸ See in Heather Russell, “Q & A with Chinese Contemporary Artist Li Shan: on political pop art and the cultural role of the artist in China.”

⁶⁰⁹ Li’s early *Rouge* series was shown in an exhibition at the STA Gallery on Huashan Road, Shanghai, in June 1989. (See Wu Liang, *The Sketches of Eight Artists*). It was a two man show with Li Shan and a French artist [Fredo Bush]. The French artist had contacted Li from Wuxi to discuss a show together at the STA Gallery. (Li Shan, *A personal note to Lansheng Zhang*, Shanghai, November 12, 2018).

⁶¹⁰ In the international contemporary art discourse, Christopher Reed argues that sexuality was raised as a topic for discussion by early avant-garde artists and has become part of Western art discourse as a contested issue since the 1960s. See in Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶¹¹ Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the birth of avant-garde art in new China*, p.255.

⁶¹² *ibid*, p.253.

⁶¹³ *ibid*.

⁶¹⁴ See also in footnote 526.

others were producing images with such a level of socially sensitive and politically dangerous content in China.

With the implementation of China's economic reform agenda, Chinese society became more culturally open and politically tolerant. The writings of some critics published in materials from the 1990s and after 2000 illustrate such developments. In his early commentary on Li's work *Awoken Dream* produced in 1984, Gao Minglu and his co-authors acknowledge that Li "narrates sexual and life subjects by using human vitality symbols against a deep and vast background of human culture."⁶¹⁵ (Figure 84.) In early 1993, writer and cultural critic Nicholas Jose commented on the eroticism in China's contemporary art at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Jose referred to the image of Li's *Rouge A* as displaying "an extreme, self-liberation that veers towards mere exhibitionism."⁶¹⁶ In an articulation of the diverse and individual artistic messages in the art of political pop art, Johnson Chang commented on Li's art as focusing on "the emasculating but erotically charged machinery of power politics."⁶¹⁷



Figure 84. Li Shan, *Awoken Dream* 《醒的梦》, 1984. Mixed media, mural.

⁶¹⁵ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.218. Original Chinese text: "[...]在深而广的人类文化背景中用大量人类生命力的象征讲述着性与生命的话题。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁶¹⁶ Nicholas Jose, "Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989-93," *China's New Art, Post-1989*, p.XXXVII.

⁶¹⁷ Chang Tsong-zung Johnson, "Preface to the 2001 Edition," *China's New Art, Post-1989*, p.II.

Further comments relating to sexuality in Li's art came much later in 2004, in a conversation between Li, the artist Zhang Huan 张洵 and Wu Liang, published on the Shanghart Gallery's website. Wu recalled that when he saw the original paintings of the *Extension* series in early the 1980s, he found that the “毛球 (Hairy Ball)” was a live, growing or expanding object, although it was painted on canvas.⁶¹⁸ (See Figure 77.) The “Hairy Ball” was a nickname that was given by a circle of Li's artist friends that referred to the key symbol of the circular shape with a hairy edge in the abstract *Extension* series paintings. The nickname implied a visual link to the male testicles.⁶¹⁹ In this conversation, Wu had been not clear at the time about Li's thinking or reading, the inspiration or sources for Li's creation. Wu met Li in 1983 and got to know him well from 1989, the period Li worked on the “Hairy Ball” series. According to Wu, when they met, Li had already shown a close interest in the body and sexuality, as well as the relationship between sexuality and politics and power.⁶²⁰ In another article Wu points out that “years later, Li Shan's work displays more direct yet ambiguous bodies and biological images full of anxiety, disorder and tension that have however been neglected by critics.”⁶²¹ As a performance artist, Zhang Huan recognised the commonality between Li and himself as both paid close attention to the body in their art. He also pointed out the differences between them as he believed Li intended “more concern for issues relating to sex (gender),” and he himself focused more on experiencing how the body can be controlled (manipulated).⁶²² Zhang's analysis explains the distinctive emotional impulse and intuitive expression in Li's works.

In 2017, a comprehensive essay on Li Shan's art by Gao Minglu, published in a catalogue to accompany a survey exhibition on Li Shan's “BioArt,”⁶²³ highlights the radical shift in

⁶¹⁸ Wu Liang, *Conversation of Li Shan, Zhang Huang and Wu Liang*, 2004. Shanghart Gallery website.

< <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/40>>, viewed on 07 July 2010.

⁶¹⁹ Zhao Chuan, *The Story of Shanghai Abstraction [Art]*.

⁶²⁰ Wu Liang, *Conversation of Li Shan, Zhang Huang and Wu Liang*, 2004.

⁶²¹ Wu Liang, “八个艺术家的形象素描 [The Sketches of Eight Artists],” in <http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/artist/txt_ab/be1atC/06actytr>, viewed 02 June 2013. The original quotation in Chinese: “好多年之后李山作品形象演变出的那种越来越直接与暧昧的身体，以及充满不安、紊乱与紧张的生物形象，却一直被评论所忽视。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁶²² *ibid.*

⁶²³ “What is BioArt? To quote Li, it is ‘to use life itself as material to build living entities. The emphasis of current biological studies lies in the intervention into heredity from biological genes and artificial generation of the biological genome. Artists using the mechanisms of genes and genic generation to formulate his or her art plans and produce artworks embedded with biological features in line with the operating patterns of genetic engineering is called BioArt.’” See Gao Ling, “Reading Li Shan and Sensing Life,” in exh cat. *Li Shan* (Shanghai: PSA, 2017), p.311-316. Also see related writings: Zhang Pingjie, “The Road of BioArt,” in exh cat. *Li Shan* (Shanghai: PSA, 2017), p.55-60; Gong Yan, “The Third Dark Cloud,” in exh cat. *Li Shan* (Shanghai: PSA, 2017) pp.1-3; Gao Minglu, “From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation,” pp.5-24; Tan Xiaozhi, “BioArt: A New Possibility for Contemporary Art?” in exh cat. *Li Shan* (Shanghai: PSA, 2017), pp.317-323.

artistic direction Li has taken since the mid 1990s with the influence of biological sciences leading him to experiment in his art. In his essay, Gao provides a lengthy discussion tracing Li's artistic practice from the 1980s and 1990s and asserts that Li's BioArt is "not a recent phenomenon." It can be traced to Li's early 1980s work, linked by the keyword "biological" (生物).⁶²⁴ In his publication *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde* and its first edition published in 1991, Gao and his co-authors defined Li's work from the 1980s (except the *Rouge* series) as part of the "rational painting" group under the term they coined the "Tide of Rational [Painting]" with a humanist tendency from the '85 Movement.⁶²⁵ The language used in their analysis was under the theoretical framework of the humanities. In this essay, Gao uses the word "biological" as a linkage to emphasise the scientific notions in Li's early work. The mystical element in Li's early paintings becomes a major aspect of the representation of "Biologism" in Gao's analysis. Through using the term "biological" (生物), Gao explicates all the symbols in Li's later *Rouge* series in the 1980s as the "Biological Gene of Social life." The particular aspect of the erotic and hermaphroditic image in Li's art is to be understood as "a metaphor for the genetic essence of political culture." He argues also that the core of Li's later BioArt (after 1994) is "living genes," and the core of Li's earlier paintings (before 1994) "lay in a grand consciousness of life" and "melded to a philosophical humanism." Gao then goes on to argue that for Li "This life-consciousness that he displays is at the same time biological, making biological metaphysical, resulting in the 'extirpation of biology.'" He views "life" (生命) as the fundamental theme throughout these two stages in Li's art practice. Gao's argument concerns "questions of life-consciousness and life forms." Li's later art practice is seen by Gao in the light of the production process of biological experiments as "extirpation of humanism" and "extirpation of metaphysics" that has expressed "anti-anthropocentric ideas."⁶²⁶

Li Shan's interest in science began in his primary school days, but there was a shift in his interest during high school from science to the humanities. There are no records of his clear aim to combine science and the humanities in his art when he started to pursue his artistic career. It was in 1993 at the Venice Biennale that American artist Matthew Barney's hybrid figure in his work inspired Li after he returned to Shanghai. Li recorded this inspiration

⁶²⁴ Gao Minglu, "From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation," p.7. A retrospective exhibition focusing on Li Shan's BioArt from mid-1990s was staged at the Power Station of Art (PSA) in Shanghai that opened on 25 August 2017. The exhibition was part of the PSA Collection Series project and curated by Gong Yan, the director of PSA.

⁶²⁵ Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.152-224. I have discussed the topic of "rational painting" at length in Chapter 1.

⁶²⁶ Gao Minglu, "From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan's BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation," pp.7-12.

during various media interviews.⁶²⁷ He began to experiment in combining science and art in his artistic expression from 1994. Developments in genetics and other scientific breakthroughs were closely observed and followed by Li.⁶²⁸ Finding a common language between his “life conscience” and new possibilities revealed by the discoveries in the biological sciences led Li to combine science in his art in the 1990s.

My research finds that Li Shan’s own statements, as well as critiques of his work including by Gao and his co-authors that refer to Li’s art practice before the mid-1990s, are framed within a humanities paradigm. Li’s interest in science, largely in mathematics and physics in the 1980s, directed his thinking mainly to the relationship of science and philosophy and questions about the definition of art.⁶²⁹ There is no evidence of the idea of biology in Li’s art in that period in statements from Li Shan himself or any critics at the time. Gao’s later assertion of the “biological” scientific notion in Li’s early 1980s work appears to be inconsistent with his and his co-authors’ early writing on Li’s art.⁶³⁰ In acknowledging Gao’s finding of “life” as an overarching theme throughout Li Shan’s art, I argue that Li’s fascination with sexuality has been at the core of his creative practice, especially in the 1980s. This provides a key for a better understanding his earlier vanguard art practice in the cultural and political context of the time. The primitivism, mysticism and symbolism in the works were metaphors or vehicles that linked this core subject to the grand theme of “life.”

⁶²⁷ For example, see Heather Russell, “Q & A with Chinese Contemporary Artist Li Shan Artist Li Shan: on political pop art and the cultural role of the artist in China;” Li Shan, “Interview by Wen Zijian,” in *Material of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980 – 1990*, Asia Art Archive Hong Kong, Chinese transcript p.9, 14.
<http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/lsftfinal_201105091421584336.pdf>, viewed 05 October 2010; Gao Minglu, “From Philosophy of Life to Genes in Life: Li Shan’s BioArt and its Anti-Anthropocentric Formulation,” p.13.

⁶²⁸ White Rabbit Gallery (Sydney Australia), in an introduction about Li Shan’s later BioArt states: “Li Shan reads textbooks on molecular biology and genetic technology for fun. His studies have persuaded him that the *Homo sapien* is in no way superior to any other organism. Indeed, he says, humans are the worst, most destructive organisms of all. He thinks it is time we completed ‘God’s unfinished work’ by mixing our genes with those of other species to create new and better forms of life.” (See White Rabbit Gallery website at <<http://www.whiterabbitcollection.org/artists/li-shan-%e6%9d%8e%e5%b1%b1/>>, viewed 28 November 2018.)

⁶²⁹ Li Shan, “Interview by Wen Zijian,” in *Material of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980 – 1990*, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, Chinese transcript p.9, 14.
<http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/lsftfinal_201105091421584336.pdf>, viewed 05 October 2010.

⁶³⁰ Gao Minglu, et al. *The ’85 Movement*, pp.216-218.

Li's ambiguous language both in his art and in his statements created a myth around the subject of sexuality in his work. In both Li's early and later works, when a viewer looks for meaning they are confronted with a labyrinth of perspectives. In some of those works he photographed his own body parts in a close-up shot, and then clipped a section such as a part of the testicle skin to form small insects or animal bodies, for example, the image for a spider body or a frog's eyes, in the computer-aided images of his *Recombination* Project in 1996-2006. (Figure 85.) The artist insists that viewers need to use their own eyes to explain the works and the art should speak for itself.⁶³¹ For instance, facing the question of what he



Figure 85. Li Shan, *Restructing* [sic.] *Plan project*, 1996-2003.
Computer-aided images, 60 x 80 cm.

wanted to express in the images of the *Rogue* series, Li has only said it is “a process of pursuing freedom.”⁶³² As I have reiterated in this thesis, for many avant-garde artists in China in the 1980s, their choice of media and art practice represented their particular response to the surrounding conditions and reflected as well their inner world of conscious or unconscious ideas. In my interviews and general conversations with Li Shan discussing his life and art in the 1980s, he refers to incidents in his life or creativity in his art as “personal stories.” He explained he links all his “stories” to the context of the political environment at the time and emphasises that his art production is a “totally personal experience.”⁶³³ It is not surprising that the political environment has been a critical factor that contributed to Li becoming a nonconformist. This is well summarised by Li's statement in the catalogue of

⁶³¹ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, (Shanghai: October 2011).

⁶³² “Interview with Li Shan” in Shanghart Gallery website <<http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/1562>>, viewed 12 May 2012.

⁶³³ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, (Shanghai, October 2011).

China's New Art, Post-1989 exhibition: "If we make 'rouge' a verb, and wish 'to rouge' something away, this is not so much a matter of will and method, as a question of attitude."⁶³⁴

The Role in '85 Art New Wave Movement: Events and Art Exhibitions

In Chapter 1, I discussed the origin of the term "'85 Art New Wave" and "'85 Movement" and the issues in using the term as an overarching umbrella to cover the whole of the 1980s in the discourse of Chinese contemporary art. The use of this term in this thesis adheres to the original pertinence of the avant-garde art movement in China in the period of 1985 to 1986 (extended to 1987 in many cases). In the previous chapters, I have also argued that during this period, the avant-garde art activities and art practices from Shanghai were an integral part of the avant-garde art movement in China whether it is called the '85 Art New Wave or '85 Movement but that many Shanghai artists displayed a distinctive position and attitude in relation to the '85 Art New Wave/'85 Movement. Among them, Li Shan was one of the activists and represented the Shanghai avant-garde artists at national platforms, participating in a number of key events organized by a core group of art critics from Beijing and other major cities. Under the flag of '85 Art New Wave or '85 Movement those events were influential in the art discourse and in the development of avant-garde art in China in the mid-1980s.⁶³⁵

In the art discourse a significant chain of official events took place at the national level between 1984 and 1986 which I have discussed in Chapter 1.⁶³⁶ The *Sixth National Art Exhibition* in 1984 was widely recognised as a turning point for the reforms in art policies and in art breaking away from the dictums of the Party's policy idea.⁶³⁷ The Fine Art Department of the National Arts Research Institute and the China Artists Association Anhui (安徽) Branch, together with a number of art institutions, organised the Oil Painting Art Conference 油画艺术讨论会 in April 1985 which was arguably the first large-scale academic

⁶³⁴ Li Shan, "Li Shan," exh cat. *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Valerie C. Doran. (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001), p.18.

⁶³⁵ See my detailed discussion on the '85 Art New Wave or '85 Movement in Chapter 1 in the section under the subheading "National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."

⁶³⁶ See in Chapter 1 under the subheading "National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."

⁶³⁷ After the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign from 1983 to early 1984, the *Sixth National Art Exhibition* opened on 1 October 1984. It was a government-sponsored showcase and has been seen as re-embracing the Maoist doctrine of art serving politics. See in Fei Dawei, "中央美术学院师生关于第六届全国美展座谈纪要" ["Summary of discussions between teachers and students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts on the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition*"], 《美术思潮》 [*The Trend of Art Thought*], 1985: no.1,11-12,16; Gao Minglu, *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.72-75.

conference on the new developments in oil painting and art in general held since the Cultural Revolution with key figures of Chinese art theory and artists attending.⁶³⁸ Following the conference, the Oil Painting Art Council in Beijing organised the National Oil Painting Art Symposium 全国油画艺术讨论会 in April 1986.⁶³⁹ It marked an introductory encounter between the art establishment and the activists of the '85 Art New Wave movement in the official art discourse.⁶⁴⁰

The participants were the representatives of the official art organisations or art institutions as well as respected artists and art critics from around the country. They also included a number of the New Wave art activists, such as the young art critics Gao Minglu and Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生, the artists Zhang Peili 张培力 from Hangzhou 杭州 and Shu Qun 舒群 from Harbin 哈尔滨. Surprisingly, Li Shan also received an invitation, although he was not a member of the China Artists Association. It was the first time representatives of mainstream art met representatives of avant-garde art in a national forum.⁶⁴¹ The face-to-face dialogue between these two different groups of representatives soon turned into a heated debate about notions of “art movement”, “imitation of the West”, the “total westernisation or nationalisation.”⁶⁴² In response to the criticisms made against avant-garde artists being “young without knowledge in history or society”, “not knowing art and oneself”, “copying the West”, and especially the description of avant-garde art as “imported products” (Puo Lai Pin 舶来品), Li Shan responded in questioning, “Isn’t your art an ‘imported product’?”⁶⁴³ He reminded them that mainstream art in China, socialist realism, was borrowed from the Soviet Union and that in criticising avant-garde art as non-representative of Chinese national culture, they too had adopted foreign cultural products. By asking whether they had seen his (Li’s) recent works of the *Expansion* series, he argued

⁶³⁸ See previous discussions in Chapter 1 under the subheading of “National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s.”

⁶³⁹ The Oil Painting Art Council administratively is directly under the top-level official art organisation - the China Artists Association.

⁶⁴⁰ There were three major papers presented at the symposium, “The Journey of Chinese Oil Painting” by Shui Tianzhong, “The Western Contemporary Art” by Zhu Qingsheng, and “’85 Art Movement” by Gao Minglu. See Gao Minglu, ed., *The ’85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, vol 2, (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), pp.46-49.

⁶⁴¹ Li recounted to me in our interview that the mainstream art representatives were mostly from two art institutions: the China Artists Association such as Lou Gongliu 罗工柳, Shao Dazhen 邵大箴, Wu Zuoren 吴作人 and Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中; and from the Central Academy of Fine Art such as Jin Shangyi 靳尚义, Zhan Jianjun 詹建俊, He Kongde 何孔德. Most were the respected artists although some were art critics or art historians. They were separated into different groups in face to face discussions which soon turned into debates. Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan’s studio, (Shanghai: October 2011).

⁶⁴² Gao Minglu, ed., *The ’85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, vol 2, (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), p 46.

⁶⁴³ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang. English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

that, at least, he was searching for Eastern traditional ideas and philosophy. That series reflected his thinking and a process of exploration. How could they ignore those and just criticise the art produced by avant-garde artists? In the debate during the symposium, Li stated:

We have different views. Our perspectives are different, our choices are different, our pathways are different, and our knowledge background is different. We are actually different. ... With all due respect, you have finished writing your part of history. Nobody can replace you. You have a category of works against your name in the history book, and catalogues with many marks. From now on, a new history should be written by new people. It would have been impossible for one person to monopolise the entire history. Not even the first emperor of Qin 秦始皇 or Mao Zedong could achieve that, let alone an artist.⁶⁴⁴

To keep the momentum generated from this meeting, a core group of activists including Li Shan, Su Qun, Zhang Peili, Wang Guangyi and others led by Gao Minglu organised two related meetings, the Zhuhai Meeting in August 1986 and the “1988 Modern Art Conference” (also later called the Huangshan Meeting) in November 1988.⁶⁴⁵ The organisers adopted the idea of a slideshow as an effective medium of communication in the Zhuhai Meeting, and as a means of showing contemporary art activities from different regions. The intention of these two meetings was to exchange or collect information about art activities and to review the art discourse, with an agenda to mount a national contemporary art exhibition. The *1989 China/Avant-Garde Art Exhibition* in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing was the outcome of these two meetings. Li attended both meetings together with Sun Liang 孙良 (artist), Xu Hong 徐虹 (artist and critic), and Li Xu 李旭 (critic) as the representatives from Shanghai. In the meetings, Li Shan introduced some avant-garde artists’ experimental works including by young emerging artist such as Ding Yi and Wang Zimei.

The surge in experimental art exhibitions and events during the period of 1985 and 1986, the so-called ‘85 Art New Wave movement, also influenced changing perceptions from public institutions towards the contemporary art scene. The best example, as I have discussed in previous chapters, was the *SAM’s New Building Completion Exhibition* in 1986 which arguably was the first to include local experimental art in an official art exhibition in China. The exhibition included Li’s *Extension* series along with the artworks of Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, and Yu Youhan. It was the first exhibition in Li’s art career where he participated

⁶⁴⁴ *ibid.* English translations by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁶⁴⁵ See detailed discussion in Chapter 1 under the subheading of “National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s”.

without political criticism or repercussion, marking a significant change in his political and social life.

As a teacher at the STA, Li readily engaged with students and young artists from inside and outside of the Academy where he lent his support and encouragement to students to explore new ideas regarding artistic language and form. His friendship with Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen and Cai Guoqiang reflected in this thesis for example demonstrated his engagement with experimental art in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Earlier he had participated in the exhibition *Wild Roses* (野蔷薇) in an art space on campus in 1978 and the *Three Friends Exhibition* (三友展) at the Xuhui Cultural Centre in May 1983.⁶⁴⁶ The works in this exhibition adopted Western modernist art styles. He was also invited to give art classes at the community cultural and art centres around Shanghai, places which closely connected artistic communities of all ages from the society.⁶⁴⁷

As contemporary art activities gained momentum in the mid-1980s, Li showed his enthusiasm for embracing experimental art activities by curating and participating in various exhibitions in that period. For example, he co-curated with another artist Xu Longsen 徐龙森 the first *Shanghai Concave-Convex Exhibition* at the Xuhui District Cultural Centre in Shanghai in 1986.⁶⁴⁸ It was intended to provide opportunities and space for young artists to engage in contemporary art activities. The exhibition organisers invited a core group of young artists but it was also open to others to participate.⁶⁴⁹ The participants were mostly young artists who had just graduated from art schools or art school students, including Yu Youhan and his students. The exhibition included experimental works such as installations and action/performance art that reflected the influences of Western contemporary art in mid-1980s China.⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁶ The *Wild Roses* exhibition included STA students such as Shen Chen 沈忱, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, Wang Chunjie 王纯杰 (the former director of Shanghai Himalayas Museum), Xia Yubing. Li Shan was the only teaching staff invited to participate. The *Three Friends Exhibition* included Li's students Wang Chunjie and Yuan Songmin. See Shen Chen, "Interview by Yu Jiajie," in exh cat. *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985* (Shanghai: Zendai MoMA, 2008), p.76; Wang Chunjie, "Interview by Yu Jiajie," in exh cat. *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985* (Shanghai: Zendai MoMA, 2008), p.212.

⁶⁴⁷ I participated in one of Li's classes conducted at the Hongkou District Cultural Centre, Shanghai in 1980.

⁶⁴⁸ Another co-curator was Xu Longsen 徐龙森, artist, gallerist and collector from Shanghai.

⁶⁴⁹ Biljana Ciric, *History in the Making: Shanghai 1979-2009*, (Shanghai: People's Fine Art Publishing House, 2010), p.181.

⁶⁵⁰ The participating artists included Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Yu Sen 予森, Wang Ziwei, Jin Ang 金昂、Qin Yifeng 秦一峰, Ding Yi, Zhang Guoliang 张国梁, Xiao Haichun 萧海春, Wu Guoming 吴国明、Wu Chenrong 吴晨荣, Li Chen 李晨, Sun Jinhua 孙晋华、Hu Jiakong 胡家康, Jiang Qian 蒋权, Sun Jingbo 孙景波 and Yang Hui, etc. This exhibition is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

The experimental spirit in Li's art practice led him towards performance art for a short period in the late 1980s. Following the first *Concave-Convex Exhibition*, Li and his co-curator initiated in 1988 the second *Concave-Convex Exhibition* and later became as a group performance/installation exhibition named *The Last Supper*. Li collaborated with Zhang Jianjun and ten other artists to mount what was at the time a most provocative show at the Shanghai Art Museum. I have discussed its significance at length in the previous two chapters. Unlike the first *Concave-Convex Exhibition*, the artists' work was more action art than structured performance art. While this exhibition was conceptually well developed and organised as a group performance, the artists' actions were individually improvised but with unified messages. It made, as I have argued, a strong impact on the Shanghai art community.⁶⁵¹

The organising committee of the 1989 *China Avant-Garde Exhibition* intended to include *The Last Supper* performance and invited the artists to Beijing to participate in the show in 1989. The discord among the artists following *The Last Supper* exhibition in Shanghai, resulted in some artists participating in the exhibition at the National Art Museum of China as individuals, and with Li Shan presenting his single performance piece *Footbath*. In a limited small exhibiting space with bare walls and a marble floor, Li placed a red folding chair where he sat on the chair bathing his feet wearing a red outfit, including a red hat. A piece of red cloth was hung behind the chair as a background. On another piece of red cloth under his coat, were fixed black and white photocopies of portraits of world leaders including US President Ronald Reagan. The red coloured wooden foot bath bowl was also covered by these photographs. Initially, Mao's images were prepared for this work. The change to Ronald Reagan was after a consideration that the use of Mao's images was still not possible in a politically sensitive environment. The exhibition was closed after artist Xiao Lu fired two gunshots at her installation work.⁶⁵² Incorporating prominent personalities, including

⁶⁵¹ See related discussion in this topic in Chapter 2, "The Last Supper Exhibition" section as well as in Chapter 3.

⁶⁵² See information on the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition in Chapter 1 footnote 103. There is a large volume of materials on the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* online and in print, for example, see Gao Minglu, *Total modernity and the avant-garde in twentieth-century Chinese art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011); Lü Peng and Bruce Gordon Doar, *A history of art in 20th-Century China* (Milano: Charta, 2010); Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, trans. Archibald McKenzie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); "关于 89 中国现代艺术展的三次'对话'" [Three "Dialogues" about the 89 China Avant-Garde Exhibition], *艺术档案* [Art Archives], <www.artda.cn/www/15/2009-12/2731.html>, viewed 28 November 2018; to list a few. Xiao Lu fired gunshots at her installation work *Dialogue* on the opening day. This action led to the temporary closing down of the exhibition shortly after it opened. A recent research project initiated by Claire Roberts has led to Xiao Lu's first retrospective exhibition *Xiao Lu: Impossible Dialogue* at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney (19 January-24 March 2019). The exhibition is anchored by Xiao Lu's performance work and examines Xiao Lu's

political leaders, emerged as part of Li's art from the period from 1987 to 1989. The appropriation of images of political personalities in *Footbath* provided evidence of the process of merging personal experiences and emotions with the changing social and political conditions of the time.

Li Shan's enthusiastic participation in national-level avant-garde events during the '85 Art New Wave period (1985 to 1989), and the collaborative actions in the exhibitions in which Li Shan participated, was the result of informal networks of avant-gardists in Shanghai. When appropriate occasions arose for art shows, the artists participated enthusiastically. Communication between artists was conducted, as I have argued, at a personal level within the artist's circle. Drawing from his personal experience in participating in and organising a number of art activities in the mid-1980s, Li found that it was difficult to form a collective art group with a unified opinion and view on art and the issues they faced. He described the Shanghai artists (including himself) as "self-confident" with individual "strong minds", and "complicated individuals who would be difficult for art critics or curators to label under a general theme to fit their art discourse agenda."⁶⁵³ Li remarked that the artists in Shanghai required "detailed individual examination, unlike art events or artist groups in other places and cities that clearly display a collective style, often with a manifesto. [...]"⁶⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Li has played a role in bringing artists together for the collaborative projects. He acted as a contact point in Shanghai for those critical advocates for the '85 Art New Wave movement such as Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, and Fei Dawei from Beijing, and Peng De from Wuhan.⁶⁵⁵ Li Shan's enthusiasm for action during the mid 1980s exemplifies the response of the Shanghai avant-garde artists in participating in the '85 Art New Wave movement on their terms: collaborative efforts instead of collective action. This characteristic of the Shanghai avant-garde art scene remained unchanged, I argue, throughout the 1980s.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the legacy of modernism from early twentieth-century Shanghai through exposure to modernist artists influenced Li Shan during

creative interest in deep emotion, extreme action, and chance in her performance works, as well as exploring the artist's thirty-year association with Australia and her eight-year period of residence in Sydney (1989–1997) in her new works. Xiao Lu lives and works in Beijing and Australia.

⁶⁵³ Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, (Shanghai: October 2011).

⁶⁵⁴ *ibid.* In my interview with Li, in criticising some of the curatorial practices in China in the 1990s and the 2000s, he recalled his experiences in a number of cases where he has been contacted by some curators only asking for photographs of his work and any written text on his work for exhibitions.

⁶⁵⁵ Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, and Fei Dawei moved to Beijing from other cities during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Fei Dawei was originally from Shanghai.

his student years at STA. The analysis in this chapter has focused on Li's three major series of artworks produced from the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s where his artistic maturity developed through his personal experiences within the context of political and social change in China. I have argued that the core of Li's creative practice in the 1980s was his fascination with sexuality. His distinctive artistic language and visual expressions in his art were, I argue, avant-garde acts that challenged the status quo of official art. Although the grand theme of "life" has been reflected in all stages of Li's art, the art he produced from the end of the 1970s to the early 1990s was expressed, through the dialectic of humanistic thought, while his BioArt produced after the mid 1990s was expressed through the idea of experiments in biological science.⁶⁵⁶ Li's later artistic explorations in BioArt could not be found in the art landscape in China up to that date. My examination of Li Shan's role as a catalyst during the '85 Art New Wave movement has been illustrated through the events in which he participated and the exhibitions he curated. It demonstrates the nature of the collaborative activities of avant-garde artists in Shanghai as opposed to the collective movements elsewhere in China which characterised the Shanghai avant-garde during the period of the '85 Art New Wave movement. The analysis in this thesis highlights the spirit of individualism of Shanghai avant-garde artists through Li Shan's nonconformist character with his art, and demonstrated that Li was at the forefront of the developments of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s.

⁶⁵⁶ Further examination of Li's BioArt produced since the 1990s is outside the scope of this thesis.

Chapter 5.

Yu Youhan: A Lonely Traveller

In this chapter I will examine how the Shanghai social and cultural environment shaped Yu Youhan as both an artist and an art educator. As well I will analyse the impact of that environment on the transformation of his art from one heavily influenced by the modernist style to abstraction from the late 1970s to early 1980s, and to political pop art in the late 1980s. The significance of this evolution in his art will be analysed in the context of Shanghai's social and cultural history and the political conditions of China over this period. This examination delves into Yu's personal history within the social fabric that distinguishes Shanghai from other Chinese cities, as well as following his artistic paths, and the agents of his artistic inspirations. I argue that the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism prepared a fertile ground for individual artistic thinking and practice to flourish in Shanghai outside of the official art paradigm immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

In the oeuvre of Yu's art genres over past decades — landscape paintings, abstract paintings, and political pop art paintings — I argue that Yu's creation of abstract works during the early 1980s was an avant-garde act in the context of contemporary Chinese art at that time. As discussed in the previous chapters on Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan, my investigation sheds light on these artists and how their exploration of new artistic modes of expression was enriched by their study of traditional Chinese philosophies that had been suppressed after 1949, and expunged during the Cultural Revolution under the slogan “破四旧, 立四新” [Destroy the Four Olds and Cultivate the Four News].⁶⁵⁷ After the “reform and opening-up” policies of 1979, these artists were immediately drawn to Western art and ideas. Their intellectual search for a new artistic language with reference to both Western art and traditional philosophies took place within Shanghai's nascent avant-garde art developments in the early 1980s.⁶⁵⁸ This process led to the strong inclination to create abstract art in Shanghai. Yu's achievements in his art produced in the 1980s, and his influence on his students and others define him as an important catalyst in the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai during the 1980s. In this chapter I will examine these aspects through

⁶⁵⁷ This slogan “Destroy the four olds (旧思想、旧文化、旧风俗、旧习惯) [old ideas, old cultures, old customs, and old habits,] and cultivate the four news (新思想、新文化、新风俗、新习惯) [new ideas, new culture, new customs, new habits,]” was used at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution campaign and first published in the People's Daily with an article titled “横扫一切牛鬼蛇神” [“Sweeping Out All Devils”] on 1 June 1966.

⁶⁵⁸ See related discussions in Introduction, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4.

his abstract and political pop artworks, his participation in some key exhibitions in this period including the Venice Biennale in 1993, as well his relationship with his students such as Chen Zhen 陈箴, Ding Yi 丁乙, Wang Ziwei 王子卫, who themselves became important figures in contemporary art in China, and internationally, from the 1990s. Their relationship was based on respect for individual artistic integrity, yet there was mutual influence and distancing from the popular trend in China of forming collective art groups, which exemplified the spirit of individualism in the Shanghai avant-garde scene particularly during the period of the '85 Art New Wave or the '85 Movement in the mid 1980s.

Connections to Early Twentieth-Century Modernist Art

As discussed earlier in this thesis after the Communist victory in 1949, Shanghai, with its semi-colonial history, European architecture, inimitable culture and society, and its early modernist allegiances, remained distinct from other cities in China. Yu Youhan's life experiences bore the impact of the political conditions in China both before and after 1949. He was born in Shanghai in 1943 to a well-off family in the banking sector, but the family experienced many hardships during the civil war between the Nationalist and the Communist Parties (1945 -1949).⁶⁵⁹ The financial struggles facing the family overshadowed Yu's childhood and early youth. At the same time the condition of his mother who suffered from schizophrenia had deteriorated and she was institutionalised, and his younger sister died from diphtheria.⁶⁶⁰ In my interview with him, Yu said that these factors from his childhood affected his view of life in ways which he cannot himself pinpoint.⁶⁶¹ In 1950 he and a sister went to live with their aunt in Shanghai's Nanshi 南市 District until the completion of primary school in 1956. In primary school, Yu began to show his talent in drawing and was nurtured by his art teacher Tan (谭),⁶⁶² who provided him with early training in drawing and sketching. With support from Tan, Yu made an attempt to sit the entry examination to enter the specialist high school attached to the China Academy of Art (CAA) in Hangzhou, but failed to pass because his art training was

⁶⁵⁹ Yu was born during the War of Resistance against Japan 1937-1945. China's Civil War between the Nationalists led by Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) and the Communists led by Mao Zedong lasted from 1945 to 1949.

⁶⁶⁰ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013). Also see Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan by Yu Youhan," in exh cat. *Yi Ban 《一斑》*, *Yu Youhan First Solo Exhibition in Beijing* (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), pp.7-8. This catalogue is published in English and Chinese and essays by Yu Youhan are autobiographical.

⁶⁶¹ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013).

⁶⁶² Yu Youhan was unable to provide the full name of his teacher. As is respectful practice in China students refer to all teachers in schools and universities either as Laoshi (老师) meaning teacher or Tan (surname) Laoshi. In the absence of a full name I use only the surname with the Chinese character.

inadequate to meet the entry requirement based on the dominant Soviet-style art education system in China at the time.⁶⁶³

When he returned to his family's home in 1956 Yu formed a strong bond with Elun (Fan Elun 范额伦), who lived in the same laneway and was a few years older. From Yu's account the Fan family appear typical of Shanghai's modernist era: engaged in modern art and literature, living in the former French concession, and associated with leading proponents of modernist art.⁶⁶⁴ Yu's interactions with the Fan family and their lifestyle had a profound influence on his life, and allowed him to escape the dire realities happening in his own home.⁶⁶⁵ During our interview, Yu outlined how the Fan family exposed him to modern art and modernist ideas. It was in their home that he saw collections of books, including on French impressionism and European modernist art, and he has stated that these were "the earliest and most influential books in my youth."⁶⁶⁶ The father, Fan Jiman (范纪曼), was a professor at a local art college, and the mother was a music teacher at a teacher training school. Fan Jiman was closely associated with members of the modernist group "The Storm Society" (决澜社) (1931) in Shanghai and was a good friend of prominent artists Lin Fengmian (林风眠) and Liu Haisu (刘海粟), who had been leaders in the modernist art movement from the mid-1920s.⁶⁶⁷ Yu described his visits to the Fan home, as being overwhelmed by the bold, unconstrained and colourful oil paintings on the walls, which included Fan's own paintings.⁶⁶⁸ Yu later learned these paintings belonged to the fauvism school. Yu admired Elun and the latter being a little older already had extensive knowledge about art and culture and was diligent in his study of no matter what the topic. Elun was an important influence on Yu in these early years and they often painted or made drawings

⁶⁶³ In China many institutions and universities have specialist high-schools attached, that largely guarantee the student a seamless progression from high-school to higher education.

⁶⁶⁴ See Paul Gladston, *Yu Youhan: The (Dis-)placed Literatus in Revolutionary and Post-revolutionary China* (Hong Kong: 3030Press, 2015). <<https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/text.htm?textId=7526>>, viewed 16 March 2019.

⁶⁶⁵ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013).

⁶⁶⁶ *ibid.* Yu Youhan was around 12-13 years old at that time.

⁶⁶⁷ Lin Fengmian studied in France from 1920 and returned to China in 1926. He later set up the Hangzhou National College of Art (now China Academy of Art) in 1928 and taught Western painting. Liu Haisu first studied painting in Shanghai and in 1919 went to Japan. Liu established the first art school in Shanghai, and together with Lin Fengmian, Xu Beihong and Yan Wenliang were known as the Four Great Academy Presidents for different art academies and as pioneers of Chinese modern art. Liu and Lin have been the prominent advocates for the modernism art movement in Shanghai since the early twentieth century. See more discussion related to Lin and Liu as well as on "The Storm Society" in Introduction under the subheading "The Modernist Art Movement."

⁶⁶⁸ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013). While Yu described his vivid impression of the Fan house, he also noted that the works were hung discreetly to avoid any political criticism.

together, as Yu was a regular visitor in the Fan home.⁶⁶⁹ The two youths had a close bond and a deep understanding of each other forged by the family traumas each experienced during their formative years. Elun's father was purged and jailed in the mid 1950s during the Anti-Rightist campaign, and, as noted earlier, Yu's life was disrupted by his mother's illness. Their friendship which began in the mid 1950s remains to this day, and I would suggest that through this friendship the seed of modernist art with its roots imbedded in Shanghai's social and cultural environment and the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism, was planted in Yu's memory and later emerged and burgeoned in his art from the early 1970s. The Fan family and their distinctive Shanghai social and cultural background, helped shape Yu's interests in both art and music.⁶⁷⁰

The "Higher Education" Experience and the Early Exploration of Modernist Art

In 1965 Yu participated in the national university entrance examination and this time he was successfully enrolled in the Ceramic Department at the Central Academy of Arts and Design (CAAD) in Beijing,⁶⁷¹ following three and half years of military service.⁶⁷² The formal art education and training programmes at CAAD had only been running for one year when they were disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. Yu and his classmates led by an allocated teacher were sent to the rural area (Shahe Laoniawan 沙河老牛湾) outside of Beijing in the second year (May 1966) to learn rural work by working together with farmers engaged in hard labour. At the same time the Cultural Revolution empowered radical young students to take control of education institutions and to attack other students and teachers. Soon after Yu returned from the rural expedition programme later that year, he found he had been labelled an "anti-revolutionist student," without any definitive evidence, by a radical student group within CAAD. Yu outlined the reasons that he understood had made him a target:

There were fourteen students in my class, most of them come [sic] from families of impoverished famers and factory workers, I am [sic] the only one who belonged to a capitalist class, and there was another student who was from an intellectual family. My family background was the worst. Secondly, I was infatuated with painting, and I even

⁶⁶⁹ Yu followed Elun and went to the same middle school 市西中学 [City West Middle School] in 1959, also located in the former French concession area close to their homes.

⁶⁷⁰ Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan by Yu Youhan," pp.30-32.

⁶⁷¹ The Central Academy of Arts and Design (CAAD) merged with Tsinghua University forming the Academy of Arts and Design, Tsinghua University, in 1999.

⁶⁷² After finishing high school, Yu joined the military and was based in Jiangsu province for two years. During his military service, he continued to practice art by drawing and sketching his fellow soldiers and learning from the art magazines that Elun had sent to him. By the time he took the national university entrance examination in 1965, he had developed competent artistic skills and a general knowledge of art history. See Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan by Yu Youhan," p.36.

brought the oil painting box to school. I would paint on Sunday to practice. This is probably why I was accused of having ungrounded professional understandings. In those years, you had to follow the communist party wholeheartedly, if you don't devote your full attention, you'd be lagging behind, and would be comparable to being an anti-revolutionary.⁶⁷³

Yu described his experiences as a student at CAAD as less about training in art techniques but rather providing a concentrated political experience during the years of the Cultural Revolution.⁶⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Yu valued his first-year study programme as important as it focused largely on ceramic moulding and production processes, traditional patterns and motifs. That training he believes opened the door for him to the rich artistic resources in Chinese traditional arts and crafts, as well as providing a base for his research and understanding of the aesthetics and the philosophy behind those traditions. This constructive impact on his artistic pursuits was reflected in his later works of the *Yuan* series and the *Mao* series paintings which will be discussed in the following section.

During his first-year study at CAAD, Yu met a teacher, Zhu Danian 祝大年, who was affiliated with the early twentieth-century modernists in China. Zhu had gone to Japan to study art and pottery in 1934 and returned in the late 1930s. Zhu joined CAAD in the early 1950s. However he was purged during the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 for his past and continuous practice of modernist-style art. Zhu was the first teacher in CAAD who appreciated Yu's work and they shared common interests in art, and both were inspired by the idea of “毕加索加城隍庙” [“Picasso Plus City God Temple”] meaning the blending of Western and Chinese art, propounded by the Deputy Rector of CAAD, Zhang Ding 张仃.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷³ Yu Youhan, “Yu Youhan by Yu Youhan,” p.36. Under the Communist rule from 1949, a family's social and political background determined their status and opportunities for jobs and studies – with preference given to people with proletarian (workers and farmers) and revolutionary (Party cadres and PLA) family under the term (家庭成份) [family classification].

⁶⁷⁴ Though Yu enrolled in 1965 he did not graduate until 1973 as the education system stagnated during the Cultural Revolution. When universities stopped teaching the curriculum in late 1966, Yu followed the trend of students travelling around the country and he visited many cities with a group of students from CAAD. Yu contracted hepatitis and suffered persistent illness until 1973, the year of his graduation. [Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013).]

⁶⁷⁵ See in Zhang Ming, “张仃：当“毕加索”遇上“城隍庙” [“Zhang Ding: When ‘Picasso’ Meet ‘City God Temple’], at <http://www.sohu.com/a/248929957_740503>, viewed 04 June 2019; Li Zhao Zhong 李兆忠, “毕加索加城隍庙” [“Picasso Plus City God Temple”], in 世界知识 [World Affairs] 19 (2010):64-64. According to Zhang Ming 张铭 (Zhang Ding's nephew), the phrase “毕加索加城隍庙” [“Picasso Plus City God Temple”] came from a comment made by well-known cartoonist Hu Junwu 华君武 on a group of Zhang Ding's work produced in 1960 with some expressive images in bright colours. The City God Temple (城隍庙) refers to the temple in many cities and towns in China. One well-known City God Temple is in Shanghai's old city close to the Yu Gardens.

Zhang had visited Picasso's studio in Southern France in 1956 and from that experience he developed a concept that traditional China culture could sit alongside Western modern art. Zhang began to explore this idea in his art and teaching practices. Later this concept and the phrase became the motto of CAAD.⁶⁷⁶ Yu describes this phrase as imprinted deep in his mind and noted that it provided a practical concept for his later artistic pursuits.⁶⁷⁷

In June 2016, the Long Museum in Shanghai held the exhibition *The Works of Yu Youhan: 1973-1988* 《余友涵 1973-1988 作品展》 including mostly landscape and a small number of portraits and still-life paintings. Some of Yu's early oil paintings in this exhibition had been also displayed earlier in Yu's first retrospective exhibition *Yi Ban* 《一斑》 [A Mark], *Yu Youhan: First Solo Exhibition in Beijing* at the Yuan Space, Beijing in 2013. Subsequently, the Power Station of Art in Shanghai held its collection series exhibition on Yu Youhan in December 2016. The exhibition showed a comprehensive overview of Yu's art together with well researched biographical and bibliographic materials. These three exhibitions held in China allow us to examine closely the adoption of Western modernist styles in Yu's early art practice and his transition into abstract art. The exhibits demonstrate how early modernist art in Shanghai continued its influence in art practice on a later generation of artists. Yu's art from the early 1970s to early 1980s showed what was referred to by Bo Xiaobo as an "awakening of aesthetic" in learning from the European modernist art.⁶⁷⁸ In the socio-political environment of the time, Yu's art practice distinguishes him from the official art that was created with its grand narrative themes.⁶⁷⁹

After graduating from CAAD in 1973, Yu returned to Shanghai and began teaching the foundation programme, including drawing and painting, at the SACC. Driven by his artistic interest as well as his professional development as an art teacher, he started to explore landscape paintings in oil and produced a considerable number of works in impressionist and post-impressionist style outside his working hours. Yu Youhan's landscape paintings can be divided into two distinct periods: the early period from 1973 to 1983, which I argue bore

⁶⁷⁶ In 1956 Zhang Ding had accompanied an official Chinese Cultural Delegation and visited Picasso's studio in Southern France. In the following year he was appointed Vice Rector of the CCAD. During the Cultural Revolution Zhang Ding was purged and experienced severe torture that affected both his physical and mental capacity. He was at CAAD when Yu entered in 1965.

⁶⁷⁷ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013).

⁶⁷⁸ See Bo Xiaobo, "Awakening of Aesthetic," in exh cat. 《余友涵 1973-1988 作品展》 [*The Works of Yu Youhan: 1973-1988*] (Shanghai: Long Museum, 2016), pp.16-17; Gao Minglu, "The Paintings of Yu Youhan: Unvarnished Simplicity and Boundless Subtlety,"

⁶⁷⁹ See Wang Wei, "Director's Preface," in exh cat. 《余友涵 1973-1988 作品展》 [*The Works of Yu Youhan: 1973-1988*] (Shanghai: Long Museum, 2016), pp.8-9; *Yi Ban* 《一斑》, *Yu Youhan: First Solo Exhibition in Beijing*, exh cat. (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013). Yuan Space is a non-profit organization, funded by the artist Zeng Fanzhi and is dedicated to promoting art.

the strong influence of modernist practice; and the later period from 2002 to the present that saw him return to the landscape genre alongside the work produced in his earlier abstract style and expressionistic figurative paintings as an extension of his political pop art. In the following parts of this chapter I will discuss in depth the early landscape period and heavily stylised Shanghai streetscapes with their foundation in European modernism, as well as his abstract works and the political pop works produced in the 1980s. Yu's landscape paintings in the later period after 2002 differ from his earlier impressionist style works as the later works emphasise a personal interpretation of the landscape.⁶⁸⁰

The exhibition of Yu's early works (1973 to 1985) at the Long Museum in Shanghai showed his oil paintings were mostly in the impressionist style of landscapes depicting Shanghai's former French concession. His adoption of modernism in his art Yu claimed was derived from his early association with local modernists including the Fan family.⁶⁸¹ The association prompted him to explore the art styles of the late nineteenth-century European masters, such as Cézanne and Van Gogh, as well as the mannerist and Spanish renaissance master El Greco.⁶⁸² Among many of his landscape paintings in this period, the 1977 painting *Hunan Road* 湖南路 (Figure 86) shows in the composition, colours and brush strokes a style close to that of Cézanne such as the *Le Quartier du Four à Auvers-sur-Ois* (1873) (Figure 87). This well-known residential scene resembles the village in France. Yu's painting features two residential buildings viewed from above the tree-lined streets contrasting with the lush green foreground. Some windows on those two buildings appear shut and others appear only as rectangular holes, which evokes a sense of emptiness or of something missing in the present. A view put forward in Anna Maria Sophie Conrad's analysis of this painting notes that there is a limited vision in the composition of these landscape paintings, created by controlled perspectives and a bird's-eye view, which create a sense of exclusion and dissatisfaction.⁶⁸³ I would add that there is also a sense of emptiness and anxiety in the

⁶⁸⁰ While a detailed examination of these works are beyond the scope of this thesis there is a large number of writings on Yu Youhan's later landscape paintings, for example see: Bo Xiaobo, "What the Heart Craves, Art Creates: A Brief View on the Art of Yu Youhan," *Yu Youhan: PSA Collection Series* (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2017); Gao Minglu, "The Paintings of Yu Youhan: Unvarnished Simplicity and Boundless Subtlety," *Yu Youhan: PSA Collection Series* (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2017); Paul Gladston, "Critical Reflections on Yu Youhan's Paintings as a Locus of Aesthetic Modernity," *Yu Youhan: PSA Collection Series* (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2017); Li Xiaofeng 李晓峰, "How Many Yu Youhans? – Exploring the Concepts in the Art of Yu Youhan," *Yu Youhan: PSA Collection Series* (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2017).

⁶⁸¹ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013).

⁶⁸² Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan about his early works," in exh cat. *Yi Ban* 《一斑》: *Yu Youhan First Solo Exhibition in Beijing* (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), p.75.

⁶⁸³ Anna Maria Sophie Conrad, "An essay on Yu Youhan," in exh cat. *Yi Ban* 《一斑》 (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), p.8.

work which could be interpreted as the artist's exploration of personal emotions in his artistic expression.



Figure 86. Yu Youhan, *House on Hunan Road* 《湖南路房子》, 1977. Oil on paper, 44 x 40 cm.



Figure 87. Paul Cézanne, *Le Quartier du Four à Auvers-sur-Oise*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 46.3 x 55.2 cm.

Yu painted a few portraits in this early period. For example, the painting of a young woman in profile, *Hu Xu Wen* 胡绪雯, (Figure 88.) reflects a more relaxed social and political environment under the “reform and opening-up” policy in 1979.⁶⁸⁴ There are subtle elements in the portrait. The subject wears a soft-patterned silk-like blouse with her hair curled in the front and painted eyelashes and lips. It is the opposite of the socialist realist style of the previous decades, and the bright colour tone is at variance with Yu's earlier landscape paintings. Impasto paint and expressive and bold brush strokes are used on the subject's clothes, and the background is rendered in a manner to contrast with the pensive gaze of the sitter. The treatment of colour and paint are readily associated with the works of Van Gogh such as *The Little Arlesienne* (1890). (Figure 89.) Yu's early paintings from the 1970s to the mid 1980s bear the marks of French masters such as in the use of vivid colours and expressive brush strokes. The brush strokes exhibit more of Van Gogh's sense of movement, however, in a sense of slight agitation or nervous excitement, rather than Cézanne's orderly, contemplative or analytical manner. The style of brush stroke is key in Yu's artistic expression and can be seen throughout his art and can be traced back to his landscape paintings from the 1970s. Conrad describes the brush strokes in Yu's early landscape paintings as revealing “a taste of his characteristic mark.”⁶⁸⁵ This distinctive sense of anxiety expressed through the brush strokes, I argue, permeates all stages of Yu's artworks.

⁶⁸⁴ See the discussion on the “reform and opening-up” policy in the Introduction under the subheading “The Spirit of Individualism in the Chinese Modern and Contemporary Art Context.”

⁶⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p.9.



Figure 88. Yu Youhan, *Hu Xuwen* 《胡绪雯》, 1979.
Oil on paper, 44 x 39.5 cm.



Figure 89. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Little Arlesienne*, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 51 x 49 cm.

Influence and Friendship with Younger Artists

Yu was usually wrapped up in his own world and his own passion for art and, therefore, had very little interaction with other local artists in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Yu's demeanour was unassuming and even somewhat withdrawn. His main interactions were with the local art community and with his students while teaching at SACC from 1973. His teaching job led to some important friendships with like-minded students, such as Chen Zhen and the later cohorts of Ding Yi, Wang Ziwei, Qin Yifeng 秦一峰, Zhao Chuan 赵川, Wang Guqing 汪谷青 and others, who all studied at the SACC at different times.

Following the establishment of the new China in 1949, educational institutions in Shanghai for the visual arts were limited both in numbers of enrolments and choice of courses. The SACC was established in 1960, providing professional and vocational training at the college level. It was closed during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution and reopened in 1973. Despite limited resources, it was a stepping stone for many middle and high-school students to prepare themselves for entrance into higher art education in universities or art academies. Like the STA, as I have mentioned in previous chapters, the SACC was one of the few art institutions in Shanghai in the late 1970s and early 1980s that had an affinity with avant-garde art activities in Shanghai, largely through student involvement. Yu was one of the few staff members at the College who was close to those students and often shared his views on the developments in contemporary art with them.

Some of today's prominent artists such as Chen Zhen, Gu Wenda 古文达, Xu Longsen 徐龙森, and the art critic Fei Dawei were part of the earlier cohort of students who studied at the SACC, while Ding Yi, Wang Ziwei, Qin Yifeng and others were part of the later cohorts. With the earlier cohorts of students, Yu had more interactions with Chen Zhen as he taught Chen's class. Chen Zhen showed his artistic maturity very early, and his association with other local artists outside of the College had helped to form his own vision for the direction of his art.⁶⁸⁶ Their relationship was one of friendship rather than the usual relationship between a teacher and his student. Yu recalled in an interview with the Asia Art Archive (2009) that sometimes Chen would give a critique on his work and back it up with theories.⁶⁸⁷ In the early 1980s, Yu and Chen were both interested in Daoism and during their exploration of that subject found their own visual style and expression in abstract art with Chen producing the *Floating Qi* series and Yu the *Circle* series.⁶⁸⁸ Yu's *Circle* series are discussed later in this chapter.

Reminiscing on his friendship with Yu when he started to study at the SACC, Ding Yi has said:

After I met Yu Youhan, I changed my view of art. I often showed him my paintings and he also showed me his paintings as well as Cézanne's art from picture books. I used to borrow [those books] from him. Of course, the picture books were sent from abroad and very precious. At that time he was very cautious and [only] lent to me overnight and I returned them the next morning. [...]⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁶ Biljana Ciric and Wen Zijian, "Interview with Yu Youhan," in *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1998*, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, 3 March 2009. <www.china1980s.org>, viewed 17 March 2011. Chen Zhen's art and his role in Shanghai in the early 1980s will be examined in Chapter 6.

⁶⁸⁷ Biljana Ciric, Wen Zijian, "Interview with Yu Youhan," p.4.

⁶⁸⁸ Bo Xiaobo, an art critic, wrote a critique on Yu's black and white *Circle* series in 1991 and later commented: "The earliest 'black and white circles' were related to the late artist Chen Zhen's ink-wash work *Floating Qi*; Chen was a colleague of his at the Shanghai Art and Design Academy [sic] at the time." Bo Xiaobo, "What the Heart Craves, Art Creates: A Brief View on the Art of Yu Youhan," p.95. In my interview with Yu in 2013, he recalled that he and Chen Zhen were very close before Chen went to France in 1985. During 1980 to 1982, they often went out to paint landscapes in and outside of Shanghai and Chen recommended Yu buy two books on the interpretations of Laozi and Zhuangzi's teachings by Chen Guying 陈鼓应. Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013).

⁶⁸⁹ Biljana Ciric, "Interview Ding Yi," *History in the Making, Shanghai 1979-2009: Artists Interviews & Work Archives* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2010), p.35. The original Chinese text: "从碰到余友涵之后, 改变了我对艺术的看法, 我经常拿着我的画给他看, 他也拿出他的画给我看, 还给我看塞尚的画册, 我曾经向他借, 他那个时候很小气, 当然画册很珍贵, 都是国外寄来的, 就给我一个晚上, 第二天早上要还给他的, [...]." English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

Yu's interactions with the later cohort of students including Ding Yi, Feng Lianghong 冯良鸿, Wang Ziwei, Qin Yifeng and Zhang Jian 张健 (artist name Ai Dewu 艾得无), led to his involvement in a number of avant-garde group exhibitions in the 1980s. In 1985 the students from this cohort organised an exhibition *Modern Paintings: Six Persons Group Exhibition* 《现代绘画 – 六人联展》 at the students' club of Fudan University and invited Yu to join them.⁶⁹⁰ In this exhibition, they showed their recent work on paper (cardboard) and some on canvas mostly in an abstract style. Each student exhibited about five paintings and Yu had eleven pieces of his abstract works including the first two *Circle* paintings from the series. The exhibition was opened to public viewing for about 10 days. The students' enthusiasm and passion brought Yu into the public arena of contemporary art activities. Art critics in China have identified this exhibition as belonging to the "'85 Movement."⁶⁹¹ It was the first important exhibition in his artistic career.⁶⁹² From this point Yu became visible in Shanghai's avant-garde art scene. He then became acquainted with a circle of local avant-garde artists such as Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Sun Liang 孙良, and Song Haidong 宋海东.

The years between 1985 and 1986 were a time when the most vibrant and exciting avant-garde activities took place across major cities in China. During this period, avant-garde artists were exploring all forms of Western contemporary art and appropriating postmodernism into their art practices. After the *Modern Paintings: Six Persons Group Exhibition*, Yu was selected to participate in the *SAM's New Building Completion Exhibition* in October 1986 where he showed one of his early *Circle* series paintings. It was the first time that Yu exhibited his art in a public art museum. In the following month, Yu participated in the *Concave-Convex* exhibition (*Aotu Zhan* 凹凸展) arranged by his student Xu Longsen. It was an artists' self-organised group exhibition that was staged at the Cultural Centre of Xuhui 徐汇 District in Shanghai. The exhibition comprised sixteen local artists showing works in various art forms that aimed to challenge the conventional notion of three-dimensional sculpture and space. Yu produced a conceptual installation work titled "The Singing Ms. Teresa Teng" 《会唱歌的邓丽君》.⁶⁹³ (Figure 90) It was constructed with a clothes hanger raised up by a bamboo stick on a round stool with white splotches of paint. Some wooden strips of different sizes and painted in white dots were pegged on the clothes hanger. A white disposable paper cup was placed on top to signify "a singing mouth." It was created

⁶⁹⁰ The students in this exhibition were: Ding Yi, Qin Yifeng, Feng Lianghong, Ai Dewu, Wang Guoqing.

⁶⁹¹ See Gao Minglu, et al. "Tide of Rational [Painting]," in *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.223-224.

⁶⁹² Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan about his Abstract works," in exh cat. *Yi Ban* 《一斑》: Yu Youhan First Solo Exhibition in Beijing (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), p.115.

⁶⁹³ Teresa Teng (邓丽君 Deng Lijun) was a Taiwanese singer who was famous in China and across the Asia region in the 1980s and 1990s. She died in 1995 aged 42.

spontaneously on the opening day of the exhibition, recalled the artist.⁶⁹⁴ It was perhaps the only time in his entire career as an artist that Yu ventured out of his usual art practice in painting. An art reporter, Li Jian, in his article published in *Xinmin Evening News* commented that Yu's work had "a sense of humour" and the whole exhibition bore a striking similarity to the East Village art from New York in the 1980s.⁶⁹⁵



Figure 90. Yu Youhan, *The Singing Ms. Teresa Teng*
《会唱歌的邓丽君》, 1986. Installation.

Yu's relationships with his students developed from their shared interests in exploring contemporary artistic concepts in their individual works and in exhibitions. These relationships brought Yu's art into the public light and led him to engage with other local avant-garde artists and avant-garde activities in the 1980s, a factor which was crucial to Yu's artistic career. More importantly, Yu's relationships with his students and other avant-garde

⁶⁹⁴ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013).

⁶⁹⁵ Li Jian, "An Art Exhibition Appeared in this City that was Hard to Understand," "本市出现一个令人费解的画展" in *Xinmin Evening News*, 25 November 1986.

artists demonstrate how in Shanghai a dynamic informal network could operate to link individuals rather than them forming collectively as a group with a group manifesto and a common goal. The integrity of individual artistic expression was a supreme objective for these Shanghai artists, a characteristic I have argued was in contrast to the collective art groups with group manifestos demonstrated particularly from the mid to late 1980s in exhibitions and events from other places in China in the period of “Art New Wave” movement. This characteristic reflected the spirit of individualism that was expressed through Chen Zhen’s critique on “Individual and Group Consciousness” written in 1986 and published in an underground art magazine in January 1987, which will be examined in depth in Chapter 6.

Abstract Art and Daoism in the 1980s

The revival of modernist art in China after the Cultural Revolution, as discussed in Chapter 1, opened new avenues for contemporary art. The “reform and opening-up” policy brought political and economic changes that led to a critical examination and reflective thinking on China’s historical and modern socio-political development. Against this background some artists started to search for new inspiration for artistic expression not only from the West but also from traditional Chinese philosophies.⁶⁹⁶

In the previous chapters, I discussed a more liberal climate that stimulated intellectual activities at the beginning of the 1980s when there was access to materials on Western art and modern ideas, and artists were able to freely read books on Western and traditional Eastern philosophies. Yu absorbed these new experiences and began to deviate from the impressionist path to pursue ways of thinking about inner processes and the role of emotion. He started to express his thoughts and feelings via abstract paintings while he was still producing works in an impressionist and post-impressionist style. From the early 1980s Yu worked quietly away from his peers and maintained a low profile in the Shanghai avant-garde art scene.⁶⁹⁷ The early abstract works that he produced from 1980 to 1983 mostly feature dots, lines, blocks of colours, and some works in black and white. (Figure 91, 92.) The influences of European early postmodernist art are recognisable in these earlier works, especially the colourful works that remind viewers of Kandinsky’s free form abstract colour works. Yu’s abstract works in this period illustrate a transition process of

⁶⁹⁶ I have also discussed this aspect in the previous artist case studies in Chapters 3 and 4.

⁶⁹⁷ During the 1970s and the early part of 1980s Yu showed his early impressionist art in the SACC and in the local district art centre where the SACC was located on the outskirts of Shanghai. Yu became known in the avant-garde art circle only when he participated in his students-organised *Modern Paintings: Six Persons Group Exhibition* in 1985.

learning and digesting intellectual knowledge and of experimentation in his search for his own artistic language.



Figure 91. Yu Youhan, *Abstract 1980-1* 《抽象 1980-1》, 1980.
Gouache on paper, 54 x 39 cm.



Figure 92. Yu Youhan, *Abstract 1981-1* 《抽象 1981-1》, 1981.
Oil on canvas, 116 x 85 cm.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Yu started an exploration of abstract art, albeit in a sporadic manner. By the mid-1980s, he had produced a body of abstract paintings that attracted the attention of the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai. As noted above, Yu was, like many artists living and working in the 1980s, exposed to newly available resources that

had been banned during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. It was the Dao De Jing 道德经 by Laozi 老子⁶⁹⁸ that had resonated most deeply with Yu. He stated: “Among them, the Tao Te Ching impacted me the most, which appealed to me strongly.”⁶⁹⁹ From complex philosophical meanings in Laozi’s teaching Yu interpreted the central concepts of “无” [“nothing”] and “空” [empty], as the spontaneity of following the way of nature and the freedom of spirit in artistic creation.⁷⁰⁰ This profoundly influenced his thinking when he was in the process of evolving his abstract painting series. The *Circle* series, which started in 1984, can be seen as a break-through in establishing Yu’s unique and distinctive series of images. (Figure 93.)



Figure 93. Yu Youhan, *Abstract 1984-12* 《抽象 1981-12》, 1984.
Acrylic on canvas, 118 x 98 cm.

A working diary by Yu from 1985 was first published in an underground art magazine titled *Visual Art* in 1987. It records the journey from inception to completion of the creation

⁶⁹⁸ A classical text by Laozi 老子, a 6th Century BC sage, is known in modern pinyin script as the Dao De Jing 道德经. In the earlier Wade-Giles Romanisation system it reads Tao Te Ching. Both Romanisation of the Chinese characters are correct. In this thesis I use the pinyin Dao unless the text is contained in a published English text using Tao. The words Dao, Daoism and Daoist are the same as Tao, Taoism and Taoist.

⁶⁹⁹ Yu Youhan, “Yu Youhan about his early works,” p.114.

⁷⁰⁰ See Yu, Youhan, “从构成开始 – 余友涵创作手记” [“Start from Composition – Yu Youhan’s Working Diary”], in *Visual Art*, (Shanghai: Self-published by Horn Art Research Association, *Visual Art* editorial committee, 1987): pp.39-40; Yu Youhan, “Yu Youhan about his Abstract works,” pp.114-117; Gao Minglu, “The Paintings of Yu Youhan: Unvarnished Simplicity and Boundless Subtlety,” *Yu Youhan: PSA Collection Series* (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2017), pp.118-33; Li Xiaofeng 李晓峰, “How Many Yu Youhans? – Exploring the Concepts in the Art of Yu Youhan,” *Yu Youhan: PSA Collection Series* (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2017), pp.168-189.

of the *Circle* series.⁷⁰¹ Yu's diary reveals that the influence of modernist art and an interest in structuralism served as the launching pad for Yu in searching for a new art form. To be able to express the "inner needs" (内心需求) of the individual, Yu stated that he had to find his own artistic path and pursue a drive to create a kind of image that could express thoughts and feelings in order to surpass a narrow and restrained visual vocabulary based on beauty and form.⁷⁰² Yu notes that this impetus was critical to him at the very beginning of the creation of a painting. Changes in mood and his thoughts at the time translated themselves into images during the creative process. The circular image was thus created in his words to unify the elements of "simplicity and ingenuity, quietness and vividness, constant and variable, being and not being." Yu sees his "Circle" as the "sense and reflection of the spirit of the universe." The painting as "substance" (质) implies the symbolic "Circle" which is linked to the "Dao" (道); the universe in the physical world which therefore unifies being and not being.⁷⁰³

Later in a conversation with Li Xianting in 2003, Yu explained his transition from an early modernist style to abstract art and his finding the circular form in 2003. He used his work titled "Yao Bian 窑变" (Kiln Change), a technical term in porcelain production, to illustrate the process.⁷⁰⁴ He stated:

This painting is called "kiln change" (窑变) and is influenced by abstract expressionism and China's social changes. On the whole, it [contains] the aspects of art and China's political environment. Because of the [political] environment at that time, I would like to find a place to escape to, somewhere I can express my thoughts and feelings. My idea of "kiln change" is a bit of a macro approach. I do not have the ability nor the interest to take a delicate approach. I like to integrate a lot of things into my art. [My] Early works with dots and changes were not directly to illustrate this part [of the image], but to grasp things in a macro sense. I saw similar changes of cloud patterns in satellite images that float around, as well as the flow of people on Nanjing Road (南京路), formations that change with each passing moment, and in fact, those [flow of] people are all [formed] by individuals. It is similar to my way thinking, sometimes this way and sometimes another way. [Therefore I] represent these as a whole. It is hard to

⁷⁰¹ Yu Youhan, "从构成开始 – 余友涵创作手记" ["Start from Composition – Yu Youhan's Working Diary"], pp.39-40.

⁷⁰² *ibid.*, p.40.

⁷⁰³ *ibid.* The original Chinese texts are: "[...]质朴与智巧、虚静与生动、以及衡与变、有与无 [...]." English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷⁰⁴ Yu understood ceramic production from his study in the Ceramic Department at the Central Academy of Arts and Design. 'Yao Bian 窑变' is the term to describe a special glaze technique and its process in the kiln to achieve dynamic colours.

say exactly how all the above aspects came together in my early exploration from 1980s to 1985. It was set then.⁷⁰⁵

The artists' statements, interviews and the materials published since the 1980s, provide evidence that the inspiration from Western modernist art was a crucial element in directing Yu's artistic practice to abstract. Yu's interest in the composition of Cézanne's paintings derived from his early study of European modernist masters during the 1970s appears as the starting point in exploring something beyond impressionist art.⁷⁰⁶ It enabled him to "depart from naturalism," and instead use "the form of the aesthetics of the composition and to deal with the objects" whether they are a landscape, a still-life, or a figurative painting.⁷⁰⁷ It is clear that traditional Daoist philosophy, European modernism and postmodernism, and the minimalist approach of American abstract expressionism were a source of inspiration in Yu's early explorations. In an interview with Yu Jiajie 于佳捷, an assistant curator at the Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Yu Youhan acknowledged how the American artist Ad Reinhardt's work of flat black colour painted on the entire canvas with an almost invisible cross in the painting inspired him to explore and develop his own artistic style, which subsequently led to the creation of the *Circle* series.⁷⁰⁸ Although Yu had seen Western abstract art in magazines and art books in the 1980s, the first time he saw original Western abstract art

⁷⁰⁵ Li Xianting., "Interview with Yu Youhan," in *Curator's Notes On 'Prayer Beads And Brush Strokes'* [念珠与笔触], exh cat. (Beijing: Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, 2003). <

<http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryimage/image/30941/pdfview>>, viewed 20 October 2017. The original quotation in Chinese: "这张称为《密变》，这个《密变》有受抽象表现主义的影响，受老子的影响，受中国社会的影响，总体上说一个是艺术的，一个是中国的政治环境，因为中国那时的环境关系，我想找一个地方可以躲避一下，把我的心思和感情用进去。我的《密变》的思路有一点是宏观的把握，如果让我很细腻地把握，我没有那个能力，也没有这个兴趣。我喜欢把很多东西综合起来。早期的东西，点来点去变来变去，不是直接描绘这个部分，而是去把握宏观的东西。我看到的类似卫星云图的变化，绕来绕去的，还有南京路的人流，一会变成这样一会儿又变成那样的队形，其实人都是单个的人。还有我脑子里的思路也是这样的，一会儿这样想，一会儿那样想，就把这些做一个整体的表现。这些方面凑在一起，在1980年到1985年早期的摸索中，很难说到底什么是决定的原因。就这样定下来。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷⁰⁶ There are a number of published materials and key writings related to this aspect of his art including: Yu, Youhan, "Start from Composition – Yu Youhan's Working Diary," pp.39-40, on p.39; Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan about his early works," "Yu Youhan about his Abstract works," pp.76-117; Yu Youhan, "Something of My Early Works," in exh cat. *The Works of Yu Youhan: 1973-1988* (Shanghai: Long Museum, 2016), p.12-13; Gao Minglu, "The Paintings of Yu Youhan: Unvarnished Simplicity and Boundless Subtlety," p.19-21.

⁷⁰⁷ Yu Youhan, "Start from Composition – Yu Youhan's Working Diary," pp.39-40, on p.39. The original Chinese text: "是塞尚使我离开了自然主义，不管是风景、静物还是人物的写生，皆以构成的形式美法则去处理对象。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷⁰⁸ Yu Jiajie, *Turn to Abstract*, p.225.

was in the exhibition *American Paintings From the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* in 1981, which I discussed in Chapter 1.⁷⁰⁹

The first two *Circle* paintings in the series were produced by Yu between 1984 and 1985 and, as noted earlier, were included in the 1985 *Modern Paintings: Six Persons Group Exhibition*, organised by Yu's students who had graduated from SACC.⁷¹⁰ This exhibition was Yu's first public art exhibition and he regards this as an important junction in his artistic career because it displayed his earliest explorations of abstraction. In the catalogue for his first solo exhibition *Yi Ban: Yu Youhan First Solo Exhibition in Beijing* at Yuan Space in 2013, he contributed an article where he confirmed:

My first and second *Circle* paintings were premiered in this exhibition [the 1985 exhibition at Fudan University], [...] both works marked the beginning of the *Circle* series. The exhibition showed my course of exploration with the *Circle* series, from the beginning to the end, which was meaningful to me.⁷¹¹

The images in the *Circle* series are mostly round flat shapes formed by distinctive short or dotted brush strokes with part of their boundary extended outside the canvas. To some viewers, the circular image resembles an enlarged fingerprint, and for others, a view through a microscope that gives viewers a sense of entering an intimate, peaceful yet dynamic sphere.⁷¹² In viewing variations of the circle image, there is a sense that those dotted brush strokes lead a way for viewers entering in and out of a sphere that the artist has created. In these works, Yu's brush strokes are the critical visual communicator to convey his meaning and to express his emotions. (Figure 94, 95, 96.) Each work in this series is named consistently in the form of the year plus month with numerical numbers (the production date), which is like a diary recording the artist's inner reality. The works suggest the

⁷⁰⁹ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: November 2013). See the discussion on the *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* exhibition in Chapter 1 under the subheading "American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston."

⁷¹⁰ The participating artists were Yu's students including Ding Yi 丁乙, Qin Yifeng 秦一峰, Wang Guqing 汪谷庆, Fen Lianghong 冯良鸿, Ai Dewu 艾得无. See a further discussion on this exhibition in the context of Yu and his influence on his students in the following section under the subheading "Influence and friendship with younger artists." For more writing on this exhibition, see Gao Minglu, et al. *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*; Zhao Chuan, 《上海抽象的故事》 [The Story of Shanghai Abstraction] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Art Publishing House, 2006); Biljana Ciric, ed. *A History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979-2006* (Manchester: Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014).

⁷¹¹ Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan about his Abstract works," in exh cat. *Yi Ban 《一斑》: Yu Youhan First Solo Exhibition in Beijing* (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), p.115.

⁷¹² See Wolfger Pöhlmann, "Yu Youhan," in *China Avant-garde* eds., Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pöhlmann, Kai Reschke (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.202-203; Li Xu, "Yu Youhan," *The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane, Australia 1993 (Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery, 1993), p.64.



Figure 94. Yu Youhan, *Abstract 1985-2* 《抽象 1985-2》, 1985.
Acrylic on canvas, 87 x 114 cm.



Figure 95. Yu Youhan, *Abstract 1985-3* 《抽象 1985-3》, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 130 x 160 cm.



Figure 96. Yu Youhan, *Abstract 1985-5* 《抽象 1985-5》, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 135 x 135 cm.

commonality of all things in the universe that comprise a myriad of combinations reflected in minute detail. The circular shape can be understood as the sphere of the universe that represents the “object world” (物界) and the “universal spirit” (宇宙精神), and “a symbol of circulating movement.”⁷¹³ In the *Circle* series, the “object world” is represented by intimations of nature including the canvas, the paint, and brush strokes; the “universal spirit”

⁷¹³ Yu, Youhan, “Start from Composition – Yu Youhan’s Working Diary,” p.40. The original Chinese text: “它是循环不已的运动之象征。” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

expresses the artist's ideas. Yu explained: "The expression I am referring to is not what we perceive of the actual object, I am making abstract paintings. My expression is a suggestion, a sense."⁷¹⁴ Yu employed short brush strokes to capture those combined elements and to express movement. Those characteristic brush strokes become infused with the artist's inner feelings. Thus, I argue that these short brush strokes in his *Circle* series are the key to open the door to his "object world" and the critical medium linking and indicating his thoughts and emotions.

In 2003 one of the proponents of abstract art in the early 1980s, Li Xianting, curated a group exhibition titled 《念珠与笔触》 [*Prayer Beads and Brush Strokes*] and wrote an article and interviewed Yu as an accompaniment to the exhibition. Unlike the political and social commentary that informed his exhibitions and writings in the 1980s and 1990s, and for which Li was best known, the curatorial focus of this 2003 exhibition turned to the artistic vocabulary of "繁复或者积简而繁的艺术" ["art in a form of complicated repetitions, or how in accumulation simple elements become complicated"]. Li found the Shanghai artists Yu and his student Wang Ziwei acted as the "先导" [forerunners] to explore such a form in abstract paintings in China from 1985.⁷¹⁵ The exhibition included a number of Yu's abstract works. Drawing on traditional Chinese ink painting, "用笔" [the use of brush] techniques, Li argues in his article that the brush strokes are the carrier of the artists' emotions and thoughts and a record of their artistic creative process. The brushstrokes could stand alone whether in figurative or landscape paintings.⁷¹⁶

The early works in the *Circle* series are largely in black and white with the background in grey or some tinted colours. Later works in the series, produced towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, became more colourful. The distinctive dots with dripping paint and seemingly free but consciously arranged brush strokes forming a circular

⁷¹⁴ Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan about his Abstract works," in exh cat. *Yi Ban 《一斑》: Yu Youhan First Solo Exhibition in Beijing* (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), p.116.

⁷¹⁵ Li Xianting, "治疗、修性艺术, 繁复、积简而繁或者极繁主义" ["Therapeutic and meditative art, maximalistic repetitions, accumulative minimalistic elements, Maximalism"] A curatorial note of *Prayer Beads and Brush Strokes* exhibition, Beijing-Tokyo Art Program, Beijing 2003, p.1. <http://www.artda.cn/www/21/2007-12/347_3.html>, viewed on 24 October 2014. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷¹⁶ In his curatorial note for the *Prayer Beads and Brush Strokes* exhibition, Li claimed that he had been interested in the relationship between traditional Chinese ink painting and abstract art in the early 1980s after he studied Chinese ink painting at the Central Academy of Fine Art (1974 – 1978). He has published articles on Chinese ink paintings and calligraphy such as "中国水墨画的合理发展" [The Rational Development of the Chinese Ink Paintings] in *Meishu* [Fine Art], vol.1, 1986; "现代书法质疑—从书画同源到书画归一" [A Inquiry on Modern Calligraphy: Calligraphy and Painting as one from the Common Origin], in 《书法研究》 [Calligraphy Studies], Vol.4, (1991).

shape became the hallmark of Yu's genre of abstract paintings. Yu stopped producing the *Circle* series in the early 1990s and started to concentrate on his political pop paintings and then later returned to "revising" his abstract paintings from 2003 to 2015.⁷¹⁷

Yu's working diary from those years, as stated earlier and published in *Visual Art*, has been a primary source that offers critics and researchers a window into the artist's thinking and creative process in his abstract art.⁷¹⁸ Many critics have focused on the philosophical sources and artistic influences in Yu's work. For example in the influential book co-authored by Gao Minglu in 1991, Yu's abstract art was identified as being in pursuit of the "Eastern spirit" (东方精神), together with the work of other Shanghai artists including that of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen (that I have discussed in previous chapters), which were categorised in the genre of "Tide of Rational (Painting)" under the theme of '85 Movement. In another early writing by Bo Xiaobo in 1991 the author argues that Yu's *Circle* series reflected a transformation from a "cultural consciousness" (文化意识) to a "consciousness of painting" (绘画意识).⁷¹⁹ Among various approaches in the writings on Yu's early *Circle* series, there is a common and critical element that is absent and that is the socio-political condition of Shanghai in the early 1980s that has, I argue, determined how avant-garde abstract art practice in Shanghai took hold. With the "reform and opening-up" policy Chinese cities developed at various stages and each city in China had its own political and cultural history, though Shanghai has always been recognised as the most diverse and international of all the foreign concessions in China.⁷²⁰ It is important to consider this in the context of individual art practices as I have argued in Chapters 1 and 2. After the severely restricted political environment of the Cultural Revolution, the "reform and opening-up" policy brought a more relaxed socio-economic atmosphere. The restrictive political structure, however, remained largely intact. An antipathy towards politics in everyday life and a desire to distance oneself from politics represents, I argue, the resistance by artists against officially sanctioned art. This kind of sentiment was especially strong in Shanghai as I have discussed early in this thesis and was stated by Yu himself in a symposium discussion during the *Metaphysics 2001-Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition* in 2001:

⁷¹⁷ Ding Yi, "Construction and Writing: On the Painting of Yu Youhan," PSA Collection Series: Yu Youhan (Shanghai: Power Station of Art, 2017), pp.58-67.

⁷¹⁸ As I have noted in Chapter 1, all formal publishing channels in China are fully controlled and censored by the government. In the 1980s, *Visual Art* magazine was to promote avant-garde art and had no possibility of being officially approved. Therefore, it could only be produced as an underground magazine.

⁷¹⁹ Bo Xiaobo 薄小波, 《黑白圆和彩色圆》["'Black and White Circle' and 'Colour Circle'"], August 1991, Yu Youhan's private archive.

⁷²⁰ See Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, pp.3-13.

[...] [We] had just come out of the Cultural Revolution and were sick and tired of the social and political campaigns and art representing things in reality; we just wanted to find an ivory tower, to have stability. That was the feeling that I expressed through a black and white simple round thing on canvas at the time.⁷²¹

Political Pop and Personal History

Today Yu Yuohan's *Mao* series paintings are familiar to the broader art community both in China and internationally. The series, which began at the beginning of 1989, appropriates Mao's image in Cultural Revolution style propaganda art and made Yu one of the leading figures of the political pop art trend in China after the tumultuous events of 1989 and the early 1990s. There are a number of iconic images in this genre in the works by Yu and others, including for example: Yu Youhan's Mao standing statue with waving hand decorated with flower patterns (Figure 97.); Li Shan's portrait of Mao in a Red Army uniform taken from the revolutionary posters but given a feminine appearance with the stem of a lotus flower in his mouth; or the typical poster style images of workers, peasants and soldiers but holding pens as weapons in juxtaposition with the logos of commercial products such as Coca Cola, Nikon or Canon etc. by Wang Guangyi (Figure 98.). These images reflect the rapid economic



Figure 97. *The Waving Mao*, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 145 x 130 cm.



Figure 98. Wang Guangyi, *Great Castigation Series: Coca-cola*, 1993. Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.

⁷²¹ Yu Youhan, An audio transcription of Yu's speech on "Metaphysics 2001-Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition" Symposium by You Yong, in *Metaphysics 2001-Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 2001), p.75. The original quotation in Chinese: "[...] 当时刚刚从文革走出来，对社会上的政治斗争，对当时的艺术表现现实的东西非常厌烦，就想找一个象牙塔，获得安定。这就是当时我的感情，一个黑白的、简单的、圆形的东西，放在布上，我感觉可以把感情的寄托基本上表现出来。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

development and consumerism that was driven by the prevailing economic and reforms policies through all levels of Chinese society at the time. A concise definition of Chinese political pop art by Chang Tsong-zung, a Hong Kong based art historian and gallerist, stated in 1992:

Although the term “Pop,” and indeed the original idea, is inspired by Western contemporary art, stylistically, the language of China’s Political Pop is rooted in the political propaganda art of recent decades, which has evolved out of a long-term engagement, since the turn of the century in fact, between Western academic realism and socially conscious art.

In the contemporary context, the significance of such an art lies in its re-appropriation of the language of mass culture, hopefully as a means by which to tame the reifying and oppressive nature of culture in the mass-communication age. [...] The overt political references in Political Pop works are also slowly changing over to general cultural issues as China’s new market economy develops.⁷²²

The ground-breaking exhibition *China’s New Art, Post-1989* held in Hong Kong in 1993 brought Chinese political pop art together with other art trends to the attention of the international contemporary art world. The exhibition included works from a number of key figures from Shanghai such as Yu Youhan, Li Shan, Wang Ziwei, and Liu Dahong 刘大鸿.⁷²³ After Hong Kong the exhibition travelled to Australia later that year where it was shown under another title, *Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and then travelled to Canada and the USA in following years.⁷²⁴ Also in 1993, an exhibition titled *China Avant-garde Art* was held at the World Cultural House in Berlin (January 1993), the 45th Venice Biennale (June 1993), and the First Asia-Pacific Triennial Exhibition (September 1993) featured contemporary art from China that included the

⁷²² Chang Tsong-zung, “Into the Nineties,” in *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, exh cat, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), p.II.

⁷²³ The exhibition was held in Hong Kong from 30 January to 28 February 1993 and also included the works of other key figures of this movement who studied and later taught at the Zhejiang Art Academy (now the China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou near Shanghai such as Wang Guangyi 王广义, Geng Jianyi 耿建翌, Wu Shanzhuan 吴山专, Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, Wei Guangqing 魏光庆, and Ni Haifeng 倪海峯. [See: *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, exh cat, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001).]

⁷²⁴ The exhibition was held in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney from 1 June to 15 August 1993. The exhibition catalogue also included the dates and places for this exhibition in Canada and the USA from 1995 to 1997. (See in Valerie C. Doran, ed., *China’s New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), p.5.

Chinese political pop artworks by Yu Youhan, Li Shan and other Chinese vanguard artists of the time.⁷²⁵

A collection of valuable essays contributed by some key international and Chinese writers and critics were published in the exhibition catalogue of the *China's New Art, Post-1989* exhibition in Hong Kong to assist international audiences in understanding contemporary Chinese art and the socio-economic conditions in which artists practiced their art. In his 1993 essay, Nicolas Jose gives his critical analysis of art in China after the Cultural Revolution.⁷²⁶ According to Jose, "like the country as a whole, creativity had become wounded, impotent, and moribund." Borrowing the phrase "China's New Art" from the title of the exhibition, Jose describes the art trends from 1989 to 1993 as a movement that emerged with the "desire to change this state of affairs."⁷²⁷ This desire is captured by one of the slogans of the 1980s "going international" (走向世界), as Jose has argued in the context of an historical Chinese modernity in his essay.⁷²⁸ He further points out:

Towards the world also applied to art, where it signalled bumper of productivity, emanating from artist groups rather than individuals, bold liberation from constraints on self-expression (especially erotic expression), ransacking of artistic traditions without regard to nation, history or cultural context, explosion of the boundaries that abstract high art from the general visual culture and material world, and defiance of literal or utilitarian meaning in favour of the journey out, towards humanity, towards existential being, towards the cosmos. Chinese art will plunder the universe in order to conquer it.⁷²⁹

While Jose focused on the socio-political background, in another essay in this exhibition catalogue, Geremie Barmé offered a cultural critique from the perspective of the commercialisation of the art market in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Commenting on the political pop art in this exhibition, including Yu Youhan's work, Barmé stated that

⁷²⁵ Among these significant exhibitions in 1993, the 45th Venice Biennale was the most important exhibition which marked contemporary Chinese art as international. (See related comments in Chapter 4 footnote 515, and for further information see in Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pöhlmann, Kai Reschke, ed., *China Avant-garde* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1993); *XLV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte; The First Asia-Pacific Triennial* exh Cat. (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1993); Wang Nanming 王南溟, "Francesca and the ins and outs of the 'Road to the East' [Exhibition] in the 1993 Venice Biennale."

⁷²⁶ Nicolas Jose is a prolific writer and scholar on Chinese culture and social studies. He was the Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing from 1987 to 1990 where he engaged closely with the contemporary arts community in China at this critical time. He has been a consultant to a number of key art institutions including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art.

⁷²⁷ Nicholas Jose, "Towards The World: China's New Art 1989-93," in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, pp. XXXVII-XL.

⁷²⁸ *ibid.*, p. XXXVII.

⁷²⁹ *ibid.*, p. XXXVIII.

artists “have taken to playful misrepresentations and rehearsals of the Chairman,” and went on to state:

It is not surprising, however, that much of the cultural iconoclasm that plays with Chinese political symbols tempers its irony with a disturbing measure of validation: by turning orthodoxy on its head the heterodox engage in an act of self-affirmation while staking a claim in a future regime that can incorporate them. On this most sublime level Mao has become a consumer item.⁷³⁰

In another piece Barmé noted:

Mao and other dated icons of the militaristic phase of Chinese socialism can now safely be reinvented for popular and élite consumption. Madonna titillates her audiences with naughty evocations of Catholic symbols, ones that are culturally powerful and commercially exploitable. Political parody in China works in a similar fashion.⁷³¹

The above insights from Jose and Barmé provide the broad socio-political and cultural contexts that I will reflect on and discuss in my extended analysis of Yu’s work below. In the catalogue *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, mainland writers presented accounts of transitions in historical and contemporary art. Li Xianting, for instance, profiled the artists who were actively involved in the political pop art trend. According to Li, these artists “have given up the serious metaphysical concerns of their earlier work” and “adopted a deconstructionist approach matched to a pop technique” to satirise and “illustrate their view of influential political figures, particularly Mao, and major political events”.⁷³² In his narration, Li places China’s contemporary art movements in the context of Western postmodern art discourse that effectively communicates with the international art world in familiar Western theoretical terms. As Jose articulates, it is clear that art exhibitions such as this one fulfil an aspiration to connect with the world.

Many writers have commented on Yu’s *Mao* series paintings under the rubric of political pop art largely from the perspectives of political, social and economic changes in China. Their arguments mainly draw from three attributes in the series. First, the

⁷³⁰ Geremie R. Barmé, “Reformist Baroque: Liu Dahong and Chinese Fin-de-Millennium,” in *Liu Da Hong: Painting 1986-92* (Hong Kong: Schoeni Fine Oriental Art, 1992).

⁷³¹ Geremie R. Barmé, “Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing from China, 1989-93”, *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, exh cat, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001), pp.XLVII-LI, at pp. XLVII, XLVIII, L. A more comprehensive analysis of contemporary Chinese culture by Geremie Barmé is found in: Geremie R. Barmé, *In The Red – On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999).

⁷³² Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, exh cat, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), pXX.

appropriation and juxtaposition of Mao's images with those of Western celebrities, the painting of *Mao and Whitney* (1992) for example can be seen as a mockery and a critical commentary on the marriage of capitalist consumerism and socialism. (Figure 99.) Second, a disillusionment with Mao's ideology in literature and art, such as art for the purpose of political ends and to "serve the masses" (为人民服务), which led to a "complex feeling" of cynicism when the artist encountered "the chaotic and overwhelming culture of consumerism."⁷³³ Third, the use of the folk art element in the flower pattern and bright colours which were part of the directives of Mao's literature and art policy together with the Cultural Revolution propaganda images can be interpreted in these later political pop works as a parody or satire of both "Maoist art" and the propaganda of Mao's public image of the past era.⁷³⁴ Some international critics have seen a similarity between the politically coded language in Yu's art and the "perestroika" or "glasnost" art from 1980s Soviet Union, arguing that they all reflect the political and social environment at the time. Yu's art, however, would have a longer currency in China with the cultural changes caused by commercialisation from on-going economic reform.⁷³⁵ (Figure 100.)



Figure 99. Yu Youhan, *Mao and Whitney*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 71.5 x 90 cm.



Figure 100. Yu Youhan, *Chairman Mao in Discussion with the Peasants of Shaoshan*, 1999. Acrylic on canvas, 164 x 117 cm.

⁷³³ Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, "1989 and New Art Post – 1989," *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), p.IX.

⁷³⁴ Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," *China's New Art, Post-1989*, Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, 1993, pXXI.

⁷³⁵ See Edward Lucie-Smith, "Yu Youhan: Mao and Blonde Girl Analysed", *Visual Arts in 20 Century*, (London: Laurence King, 1996). (Accessed from Yu Youhan's private photocopy archive.)

Previous studies of Yu's art have taken the approach of seeing it in the context of the big picture or big themes utilised to construct the contemporary art discourse in China by forming broad social and political narratives. Today, such narratives are still prevalent in the literature on Chinese contemporary art, especially in China. This approach can lead to a formulaic and generalised perception of the "big picture" that I contend often overlooks the inner processes of the artist's mind and their personal experiences. A society is made up of individuals. Without a serious study of the individual, society would not be accurately represented in the big picture.

In an article written in 1990 by Wu Liang after he visited Yu's studio and which was later published in 1993, Wu observed the importance of Yu's Cultural Revolution experiences in his visualising a mixture of 1960s and 1970s Chinese political propaganda posters and Western pop art to Yu's paintings produced during the period from 1988 to 1990. Those paintings depicted the images of Mao and ordinary objects from everyday life from this era including a hot water bottle, bicycle, playing cards, and blue flowering pattern cloth, which "contains an attitude that is not a very clear allegory."⁷³⁶ Wu went on to suggest:

In our present life, those secular patterns and vast popular posters of the leader's portrait under Yu Youhan's brush can no longer be easily found. In this regard, it is very different from the pop art in a strict sense. Rather, it is a kind of recounting or imitation of 'pop art'. He tried to reproduce the past era as well as its unique symbol.⁷³⁷

Yu's individual artistic vocabularies, such as his distinctive brush stroke techniques and the use of flower motifs, have been noticed by critics in their writings related to Yu's artistic styles. For example, Wolfger Pöhlmann in his article in 1994 commented on the "agitated brush stroke" in forming a "simplistic cross and circle" in Yu's abstract paintings, but did not explore this aspect further.⁷³⁸ Conrad in her essay in 2013 also discussed at length Yu's brush stroke technique in terms of its links to the impressionist masters and to Chinese calligraphy.⁷³⁹

⁷³⁶ Wu Liang, "From Yuan to Idol – Comments on Yu Youhan's Paintings," in *Bright Moon Journal* (1993). [《从圆到偶像—评余友涵的画》，明月报刊，1993.] The original Chinese text: "包含着一种态度并不是很明朗的讽喻。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷³⁷ Wu Liang, "From Yuan to Idol – Comments on Yu Youhan's Paintings." The original Chinese text: "在我们的当前生活中，已经找不到余友涵笔下的那些世俗图案和风靡全国的领袖肖像印刷品，就这点而言，他是和严格意义上的波普艺术很不一样的。毋宁说，这是一种追述式的波普艺术，它试图把一个逝去的时代以及它的特有标志再现出来。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷³⁸ Wolfger Pöhlmann, "Yu Youhan," *China Avant-garde* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp.202-203. (This publication is linked to the exhibition *China Avant-garde* in The International Cultural House in Berlin in early 1993.)

⁷³⁹ Conrad., *Yuan Space*: Beijing, 2013

During my research, I found that there was a very personal experience which, I argue, could be a contributing factor in Yu's brush stroke techniques and visual vocabularies. Yu openly discussed with me his mother's mental illness and how that dramatically changed his family life during his childhood and youth. In my interview, Yu gave a detailed account of his childhood memories of his family tragedy and talked about the significant psychological impact it had on his life. He spoke frankly about his mother's schizophrenia. There was a moment when he struggled to control the emotion in his voice and words. He told me that one of his unforgettable memories of his mother's illness was when she was wandering the Shanghai streets picking up autumn leaves to decorate herself — attracting the attention of onlookers — and for him this was a moment of sadness and beauty mingled with humiliation that had left a painful scar in his memory. This sense of fear and abnormality cast a shadow over his childhood. His mother was from a well-off family and graduated from university in Beijing in the 1930s. Yu recalls her artistic talents with beautiful hand-writing. He confirmed that his mother's illness had a significant psychological impact on his life which he described as "inheritance". He also said, however, that this was also a useful deflector to avoid official criticism and censure when his artworks came too close to politically sensitive issues.⁷⁴⁰ This deep personal experience and memory, I propose, may be manifested in Yu's artistic creations as "the redirection of feelings and desires and especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood toward a new object" that is described in Freud's "transference" theory.⁷⁴¹ Although the flower motifs may have been simply an appropriation of the traditional folk art style, the dotted line found through his brush strokes that can be found in Yu's early modernist landscapes, abstract paintings as well as in the later political pop art of *Mao* series may represent his inner emotions and an intrinsic psychological state. This personal insight provides a rare access to the artist's state of mind and enables one to better understand Yu's art against the background of China's social and political changes.

In the early 1990s, Yu's turn away from his abstract works in favour of pop art techniques was for many critics a radical departure in terms of artistic expression. For the artist, however, it was a natural process. In conversation with an art curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Yu stated:

The change came about for a few reasons. For one, I had already made abstract paintings. Suppose I still did that up to this day; of course I would have gradually modified its outward appearance. I am somebody who likes change. Take, for example,

⁷⁴⁰ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 2013).

⁷⁴¹ The cited definition on "transference" is from the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transference>>, viewed 27 October 2017. There are volumes of books on Freud's psychoanalytic theories, for example, See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953-74.

the “Circle” series. If I paint a black circle today, then next time I’ll probably make it white. After the white one is finished, I might just paint a black one again. I am not like a scientist who will research the same thing for twenty or even fifty years, research it to death. I don’t want to take art and wring it dry. When the “flowers of my soul” bud and bloom, then I am happy. Then I turn back to see what other stimuli society has to offer, and I change my ways to meet their challenges. For me, it’s a very natural process.⁷⁴²

Yu believed that it was essential for him to follow his own creativity, feelings and emotions to create his art. For an artist living in a constantly changing political and social environment, a seemingly radical shift in artistic expression may not be surprising. At the end of 1989 Yu went through a transitional period before his first Mao series emerged, producing some early experimental works in the pop art style such as the *RMB series* 《人民币系列》, *Turkish Court Lady* 《土耳其宫女》 and *Roman Arena* 《罗马竞技场》. In these works, Yu appropriated and manipulated the images from photographs of *The Grand Odalisque* by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and the architecture of the Colosseum in Rome. Using Ingres’ original image, Yu added flowers to the women’s figures as well as to the background. During this transitional period, we can trace Yu’s experiments not only with the pop art style but also his flower motif. His works in this transition period to demonstrate his experiments in turning his aesthetic expressions into social-political annotations/commentaries, which became manifest in the subsequent *Mao* series paintings.

The first painting in the *Mao* series, titled *Chairman Mao on Tiananmen* and produced some time between late 1988 and early 1989, marks the beginning of Yu’s incorporation of the flower motifs in portraits of Mao. The types of flowers are varied but are mainly roses and peonies. Like the short brush strokes in his earlier *Circle* series, they were sometimes rendered freely and sometimes in patterns. The flowers were also painted in such a way as to create the visual illusion that they and Mao are switching positions and blending into the foreground and background. This technique creates spatial depth and effectively transforms the flat painted silhouettes and portraits of Mao into multi-layered images, reminding viewers of the technical treatments in Andy Warhol’s work. The effects from the treatment of the flowers evoke a sense of discomfort, irritation and aloofness, especially in early pieces in the series such as *Mao Image in Rose* (1992) and *Mao Image with Patterned Print* (1992) (Figure 101, 102.), which clearly reflect the creator’s mood and state of mind. Compared to

⁷⁴² Yu Youhan: Abstract, Concrete,” Leap Art Magazine, 7th Edition, Modern Media Group, Hong Kong, 2011. Online access: < <http://leapleapleap.com/2011/03/youhan-abstract-concrete/>>. Also see: Interview of Yu Youhan by Hans Ulrich Obrist, ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai, 2009. <http://www.shanghgartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/1781>, viewed on May 2013.



Figure 101. Yu Youhan, *Mao Image in Rose*, 1992.
Acrylic on canvas, 71.5 x 90 cm.



Figure 102. Yu Youhan, *Mao Image with Patterned Print*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 111 x 88 cm.

other political pop artists in the same period, Yu's incorporation of the flower motifs in his *Mao* series paintings is quite distinctive and unique. It is not only a parody or pastiche of propaganda art and traditional folk art style but, I argue, also a coded personal vocabulary which distinguishes his work from that of most other artists at the time. Such characteristics can also be found in Li Shan's *Rouge* series as both artists' works have reflected their personal responses with various messages consciously or unconsciously encoded in the visual materials. In a self-question and answer format writing in the exhibition catalogue for

his first solo exhibition in Beijing in June 2013, Yu attempted to explain the relationship between the political reality and the process of his art creation:

Q. Were you contemplating these political questions while making paintings[painting]?

A. No. Painting was [is] painting. The foremost is how to be a human being and how to be a compassionate and clear-minded person.

And secondly?

Q. Secondly, how to cultivate oneself artistically through seeing and learning.

A. One must look, learn and be reminded of the outstanding artworks while knowing why they are outstanding.

Q. Is there a third requirement?

A. It is to passionately express and present the beauty of one's heart.⁷⁴³

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed examination of Yu's personal history to illustrate Shanghai's social and cultural milieu and its historical links to early modernism in Shanghai. This analysis has not only provided evidence of the legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai, but also the possibilities presented for changes in contemporary art in the awakening period after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The discussion in this chapter of Yu's artistic achievements has focused on the modernist influence in the early period from 1973 to 1979, his abstract art in the 1980s, and political pop art in the later 1980s. I have suggested that aesthetic principles have always been the core concern in Yu's art reflected in his genres in each period. In his process of artistic exploration, the influence of traditional Chinese philosophy was key in the early stages of the evolution of his artistic language. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Yu's ideas challenged the official art status quo. The expression of individual experiences, ideas and emotions was essential in Yu's art. I have highlighted the significance of both his brush strokes and the flower pattern motif in Yu's art of the 1970s and 1980s in relation to his personal life history. The examination in this thesis of Yu's friendship with his students and other artists and their commitment to individualism in making cooperative art exhibitions yet in distancing

⁷⁴³ Yu Youhan, "Yu Youhan about his Abstract works," in exh cat. *Yi Ban 《一斑》: Yu Youhan First Solo Exhibition in Beijing* (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), p.114.

themselves from forming a collective art group, especially during the mid-1980s and the '85 Art New Wave movement, again provides strong evidence of the importance of the spirit of individualism in Shanghai's avant-garde art scene during the 1980s.

Chapter 6.

Chen Zhen, Cai Guoqiang, and Gu Wenda

The previous three chapters have dealt primarily with three artists, Zhang Jianjun, Li Shan and Yu Youhan, who worked and lived throughout the 1980s in Shanghai. This chapter will continue the investigation of contemporary art in Shanghai in the 1980s by focusing on the art practices of three artists who left Shanghai in the same decade to pursue their artistic endeavours in the international contemporary art arena: Chen Zhen, Cai Guoqiang, and Gu Wenda.⁷⁴⁴ This chapter will examine their shared experiences and their artistic careers in relation to the Shanghai art milieu in the 1980s. Given these artists' subsequent highly successful careers, and their distinctive and complex bodies of artwork, it would be difficult to discuss the full extent of their influence even in three separate chapters. Thus, this chapter will concentrate on their careers in Shanghai in the 1980s where relevant to the central themes of this thesis. The early artistic careers of these artists, I argue, played a crucial role in forming their thinking and the later direction of their art practices. The distinctive art environment, the modern history of Shanghai and how the city was conducive and critical to the growth of experimental art in the 1980s, will be again evaluated through the following three case studies.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chen Zhen, Cai Guoqiang, and Gu Wenda were young art students in Shanghai. My investigation probes into their student years, and their early artistic careers, to explore how they related to the art environment of Shanghai in the 1980s. I also explore their interactions with other local artists, some of whom I have already described in this thesis as “catalysts” — interactions that led to Chen, Cai and Gu also becoming “catalysts” themselves in the evolving avant-garde art in Shanghai at that time. Another common factor shared between these three artists was the fact that they all moved overseas in the 1980s. Furthermore, a critical early international exhibition on contemporary Chinese art *Silent Energy: New Art from China* organised by Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1993 included these three artists' works.⁷⁴⁵ This chapter focuses on the experimental art

⁷⁴⁴ Chen Zhen moved to France in 1986 and Cai Guoqiang moved to Japan in the same year. Gu Wenda moved to the United States in 1987.

⁷⁴⁵ The *Silent Energy: New Art from China* exhibition at Museum of Modern Art Oxford (June 1993) consisted of site-specific installation works by eight artists, Chen Zhen, Cai Guoqiang, Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping, Wang Luyan, Guan Wei, Xi Jianjun, and Yang Jiechang. This exhibition and the *China Avant-Garde* exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (January 1993) were co-related projects. Initially both institutions from the late 1980s had worked on their own contemporary Chinese art projects, however, the EU embargo on activities with China following the June Fourth Incident led to the institutions working together during this period. See in David Elliott, Lydie Mephram, Hou Hanru, exh cat. *Silent Energy: New Art from China*, (United Kingdom:

practices pursued by Chen, Cai and Gu and the essential quality of individualism that I argue was reflected in their art and actions in Shanghai before they moved overseas.⁷⁴⁶ My investigation will include some of the ideas that these artists shared with other artists in Shanghai in relation to the avant-garde art scene in China, particularly in relation to concepts of individualism and collectivism. My analysis within this context focuses on the following: Chen's critical essay written in October 1986 on individual and group consciousness;⁷⁴⁷ Cai's analysis of contemporary art in China as having "failed to incorporate the values of individualism,"⁷⁴⁸ as well as Gu's statement on individualism⁷⁴⁹ in relation to the '85 Art New Wave activities. From the beginning, Gu Wenda has been conscious of his individualistic position in the '85 Art New Wave activities.⁷⁵⁰ This was evident from his statements in two critical interviews, one with Fei Dawei in 1986 and the other with Shi Jian in 2007. It was also reaffirmed by Gu during my interview with him in 2016. These three artists, together with the artists discussed in the previous three chapters, have generally been recognised as important figures in the '85 Art New Wave period (later termed as the '85 Movement). The '85 Art New Wave was generated by both the vigorous artistic activities of the artists and the vibrant art criticism led by a group of young critics. It has been viewed as a "collective movement" with the quality of a "mass movement."⁷⁵¹ During this period, the contributions of the selected artists in this thesis are not confined to the development of their personal artistic languages, but also how they contributed to the '85 Art New Wave in ways that were distinctively individual, as opposed to the collective approaches, of many artists acting in groups in other major cities in China.⁷⁵² The latter aspect of their contributions, I argue, has not been adequately studied in the art discourse on contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s.

Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1993), <<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/library/silent-energy-new-art-from-china>>, viewed on 08 June 2020; Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pöhlmann, Kai Reschke, ed., *China Avant-garde* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1993).

⁷⁴⁶ The concept of an avant-garde artist as a "catalyst" is defined in this thesis as a person who precipitates or accelerates change in avant-garde art activities in China in the 1980s.

⁷⁴⁷ Chen Zhen, "Individual Consciousness and Group Consciousness" ("个体意识与群体意识"), pp.32-33. Chen's article was written in October 1986 and published in an underground art magazine *Visual Art* in January 1987. See *Visual Art*, Self-published by Horn Art Research Association, Visual Art editorial committee, (Shanghai: 1987). The following section will discuss this text in more detail. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷⁴⁸ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Talk Talk What About The Art," in *What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China* ed. Cai Guo-Qiang (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2016), pp.23-25. This publication was produced to accompany the exhibition of the same name, curated by Cai at Qatar Museums in 2016.

⁷⁴⁹ See an examination of his position in the section entitled "Gu Wenda" in this chapter.

⁷⁵⁰ See the discussion and definitions of the terms "'85 Art New Wave" and "'85 Movement" in Chapter 1.

⁷⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁷⁵² The artists formed groups in major cities for example, the Northern Art Group (Heilongjiang), Chishe 池社 (Hangzhou), Xiamen Dada (Xiamen), etc. (See in Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.152-204.)

Chen Zhen

As discussed earlier in this thesis, artists in China began to enjoy limited freedom following the dismantling of the Cultural Revolution's political restrictions in 1976. The demand for artistic freedom gained momentum in the late 1970s and early 1980s as many artists in several major cities started to form groups and to join forces to break away from the official art dictum. However, this tendency towards collective action, as I have argued in previous chapters, was resisted by the Shanghai avant-garde artists.⁷⁵³ In response to these developments, Chen Zhen wrote a critique in October 1986 expressing his views on the distinction between "individual consciousness" and the "group consciousness." Titled "Individual and Group Consciousness" (个体意识与群体意识) it was first published in 1987 in a Shanghai underground magazine with a limited circulation aimed at local avant-garde art circles.⁷⁵⁴ Chen Zhen argued that "the primary requisite for revitalising Chinese modern art should be the thorough elevation of the individual consciousness!" (中国现代艺术的振兴, 首先应该是个人意识的彻底升腾!) He condemned "group consciousness" and called for "instantaneous activation and strengthening of a complete awakening and absolute affirmation of the individual consciousness" (个体意识的彻底觉醒与绝对肯定, 却瞬待开启与强化). According to Chen, this "group consciousness" was essentially an "anamorphosis" (变体) from "social subject consciousness" (社会主体意识) and could become a layer of "potential psychological accumulation" (潜在囤化的心里积淀) residing in the minds of artists, which would endanger the art world in China.⁷⁵⁵ This critique provides a critical tool to survey the preconditions or considerations that gave rise to the thoughts of both the artist and like-minded others in Shanghai, and also how Chen Zhen's thinking at the time when he wrote the piece, influenced his future artistic practice.

In the opening statement of his article, Chen clarifies that his discussion is not intended to be a general judgement on forming art groups. His aim is to alert us to the hidden hazard in China's art world about how he perceived the anamorphosis of "group consciousness" as a derivative of the "social subject consciousness" which is inherited from Chinese modern history.⁷⁵⁶ Taking a philosophical approach he argues that, "group consciousness" can lead

⁷⁵³ See the discussion on this issue in the Introduction and in Chapters 1 and 3.

⁷⁵⁴ The term "underground" is used generally to describe its non-official nature. Chen Zhen's critique was self-published in a magazine called *Visual Art* in 1987. For a detailed discussion of this underground magazine see Chapter 1. Chen wrote this essay in Shanghai just before he moved to France in 1986.

⁷⁵⁵ Chen Zhen, "Individual and Group Consciousness" ("个体意识与群体意识"), pp.32-33. My understanding of the "social subject consciousness" that Chen Zhen is referring here is to the Party's dominant political ideology. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.32.

to a blind following of the idea from the group and an unconscious self-depreciation, which is a passive psychological condition. Chen argues that although the “collective” bears a positive effect and meaning from the perspectives of the unity of humanity at the time, or from a retrospective viewpoint, however, in the art sphere, the artist may have no connection with the “group consciousness” at all. He sets out his argument as follows:

In my view, there exist only absolute personal subjective consciousness and pure personal emotional freedom, as well as internal conflict and intensification of social integration and individual pluralization in the art world, in which there is no balance and reconciliation between them. The ‘group’ is at most a social requirement but not a demand from an individual. Group consciousness inevitably becomes a kind of corrosive agent that weakens the “group” itself.⁷⁵⁷

He further explains that artists might often be unaware that “group consciousness” is a subconscious psychological state where it emerges in response to an attempt to break through “传统结块” [the accumulation of tradition]. In Chen’s view it is a hidden mental condition prone to produce confusion and blindness for the artist. In the state of “group consciousness” as with artists in a “group” scenario, the emphasis on the individual subjective idea is then compromised by common interests or easily tilted toward a common movement such as resentment and hostility towards rigid stereotypes. As the collective desires are often stronger than an individual’s capacity to consciously grasp, develop or explore, the individual psychological world inadvertently complies with the unified actions or the will of the collective. Under the influence of such group consciousness, the consensus from a group often overwhelms individual expression and neglects the individual will, which is the essential determinant of the group’s level of impact and historical value. The “group consciousness” becomes a latent concept in each artist’s mind that would, Chen argues, finally destroy the “group” itself.⁷⁵⁸

Chen’s critique resonates with the ideas of other Shanghai artists discussed earlier in this thesis, such as Zhang Jianjun, Li Shan, and Yu Youhan. Each of these artists chose a different means to express their views. Zhang Jianjun, for example, disengaged himself from all activities connected with the notion of collectivism, as discussed in Chapter 3. In examining the individual artist’s ideas, it is important to bear in mind that the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s was a transitional period characterised by artistic ideals and

⁷⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.32. The original quotation in Chinese: 在我看来, 艺术天地中只存在绝对的个人主体意识与纯粹的个人感性自由; 只存在社会一体化与个人多元化的内在冲突与矛盾激化, 而不存在它们之间的平衡与调和。“群体”至多是一种社会的需求而绝非是个人的需要。群体意识必然成为某种削弱“群体”本身的腐蚀剂。English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.32.

passions as the “reform and opening up” policy gained momentum. The avant-garde art activities were in part motivated by the desire to generate greater momentum to challenge the status quo. As these activities spread, they began to attract more young artists. As previously outlined there was a tendency towards forming art groups in some major Chinese cities, especially in Beijing, where a number of key art critics had been garnering the united collective efforts to challenge the official barriers.⁷⁵⁹ Such activities made some Shanghai artists wary because, as I have argued in earlier chapters, they were reminded of the familiar collective revolutionary movements and of their personal experiences in the political tragedies of modern China derived from such movements, especially during the Cultural Revolution. It raised concerns amongst these Shanghai artists that this kind of collective revolutionary mode in the development of contemporary art might emasculate individual voices.⁷⁶⁰ These concerns were clearly reflected in Chen’s critique. Such concerns, as I argued and discussed in depth in the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this thesis,⁷⁶¹ also stemmed from the city’s history in the context of the early communist movement in the first half of the twentieth century as well as the role of Shanghai in Mao’s waging of the Cultural Revolution. It was through researching Yu Youhan’s private archive in 2014 that I uncovered the full text of Chen Zhen’s critique in *Visual Art*.⁷⁶² This critical piece of writing by Chen Zhen is not widely known given its limited circulation and the short-lived nature of this underground publication. While some art critics in China are aware of the publication *Visual Art* and for example Gao referenced some articles from the magazine in both editions of his publication’s *’85 Movement*, nonetheless Chen Zhen’s important essay was overlooked by Gao and his co-authors, and is also absent in contemporary art discourse.⁷⁶³

From Chen Zhen’s critique, one can sense the pressure and urgency facing artists in Shanghai in relation to the issue of forming art groups. As a young artist graduating from the STA in 1982, Chen Zhen soon plunged himself into critical debates. To articulate the subjects of consciousness and unconsciousness with clarity, one must have a sound knowledge of philosophy and psychology. His writing displays an intellectual depth and a profound understanding of contemporary issues. Clearly, Chen Zhen had been reading many Western

⁷⁵⁹ See previous discussions on this phenomenon in relation to the ’85 Art New Wave activities or ’85 Movement in Chapter 1.

⁷⁶⁰ See previous discussions on these concerns in Introduction and Chapters 3, 4, 5.

⁷⁶¹ See also an analysis of the socio-political conditions in Shanghai during the Mao era (1949 to 1976) in Bergère, *Shanghai: China’s Gateway to Modernity*, pp.367-406.

⁷⁶² I read *Visual Art* in the late 1980s, though my interests at that time were more directed to new artistic experimentations. It was not until I revisited it again during my formal interview with Yu Youhan at his studio in 2014 that I appreciated that Chen Zhen’s essay is still highly relevant today in the art discourse.

⁷⁶³ Chen’s critique has been overlooked by both Chinese and international writers, and there has been no mention of it in either China or in international art discourses up to the present day. To my knowledge, I am the first to translate Chen’s critique.

and traditional Chinese philosophical and scientific books just as many others did during the period known as the Cultural Fever, a phenomenon which has been discussed earlier in this thesis. In my interview with Zhang Jianjun, he recalled that when they both were at the STA in the early 1980s, he and Chen used to exchange books ranging from works of Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and many other Western modern thinkers translated into Chinese, as well as the Chinese literature on Daoism (Taoism) and I Ching (Book of Changes) and so on.⁷⁶⁴

A relatively short (approximately 1500 Chinese characters) essay, the critique expresses the unequivocal view of the artist not only on the current debate regarding “individual consciousness” and “the group consciousness” but also on a number of other debates that were the hot topics across the country at the time, such as the “New versus Old” or “Chinese versus Western” debates which Chen viewed as “dry and tasteless.”⁷⁶⁵ In the final sentence of his critique, Chen calls for the elevation of “individual consciousness” that he describes as the primary requisite for the revitalisation of Chinese modern art.

Born in 1958 and growing up in a family of medical doctors, Chen Zhen was a gifted and intellectual artist.⁷⁶⁶ He was regarded as an intellectually and artistically mature student during his studies at various art institutions in Shanghai. From 1973 to 1976, Chen was a student majoring in jade carving at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College. Following his graduation, he became a teacher at the College and taught there until 1978. Yu Youhan recalled Chen Zhen as a talented student with strong academic as well as drawing and painting skills.⁷⁶⁷ Yu often invited Chen to give a critique of his own drawings when they later became better acquainted as colleagues. The age difference did not stop the two artists from becoming friends and discussing their common interests in the Dao (Tao) and other

⁷⁶⁴ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 November 2004). Chen Zhen’s reading of Eastern and Western philosophies, religions, and aesthetic theories has also been mentioned in Gao Minglu and co-authors’ book “Chinese Contemporary Art History: 1985-1986” first published in 1991. Gao and his co-authors described the art of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Yu Youhan, and Chen Zhen under the theme of the “Tide of Rational [Painting].” By referencing Wu Liang’s article on Chen Zhen’s art in *Visual Art*, an underground art magazine, as well as the writing of Chen Zhen’s prologue titled “艺术手札” [Artistic Autography] from his first solo exhibition in Shanghai, Gao and his co-authors used the expression “Eastern consciousness” to analyse Chen’s art and writing. Gao’s book, however, makes no mention of Chen’s important critique on “Individual Consciousness and Group Consciousness” also in the same edition of *Visual Art*. See Gao Minglu, et al., *The ’85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.220-223.

⁷⁶⁵ Chen Zhen, “Individual Consciousness and Group Consciousness.”

⁷⁶⁶ Chen Zhen’s parents were well-respected doctors and professors at Shanghai Jiaotong University and the Ruijin Hospital. His brother, Chen Zhu, a leading international medical scientist, was China’s Minister of Health from 2007 to 2012.

⁷⁶⁷ Yu Youhan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 16 December 2013).

philosophical questions while one was working on the *Floating Qi* 《气游图》 series and the other on the *Circle* series in the early 1980s.⁷⁶⁸

Chen Zhen's four years of study (1978-1982) at the STA in the Stage Art Design Department was extremely important for his art practice. As with other artists discussed in the previous chapters, the dynamic, open and stimulating culture of this institution was conducive to Chen's artistic development. He was influenced by and became very close to his professor, Chen Junde, a well-respected modernist in the 1970s and a student of Liu Haisu, a protagonist of modernism in China in the early twentieth century.⁷⁶⁹ One of the portraits in oil that Chen Zhen painted in 1981 shows a strong modernist influence. (Figure 103.) In this portrait, a nude woman has a lightly-coloured blanket draped over her shoulder down to the lower part of the body. Her head is turned to one side, providing a clear facial profile. The dark green and blue background with a tinge of violet creates a dramatic ambience. Such use of colour in the impressionist style to express individual emotions was denounced by the Party after 1949. It was also prohibited to show a woman's breasts as nudity was taboo and considered as evidence of the decadent influence of Western capitalism. At that time, the portrait was also subversive because art in the modernist style was still categorised in official dogma as "bourgeois" and as exemplifying the "spiritual pollution" of capitalism from the West.



Figure 103. Chen Zhen, *Portrait* 《肖像》, 1981. Oil on canvas.

⁷⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁶⁹ See the section on Chen Junde in Chapter 3. Chen Junde was a key figure in the Shanghai modernist art scene during and after the Cultural Revolution. He was famous for his paintings in the impressionist style. He avoided political punishment by keeping his art practice private and was thus able to teach students in the STA and privately at home. He was the teacher of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, and Cai Guoqiang who are all discussed as case studies in this thesis. Also see Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 November 2004).

After graduating in 1982, Chen Zhen was invited to teach at the STA. A work produced in 1983 in the expressionist style and named *Untitled* showed a reflection of his thinking at that time in its use of mixed symbolic elements including Chinese oracle bones script. (Figure 104.) It represented a transitional period for Chen in his aesthetic approach. He became



Figure 104. Chen Zhen, *Untitled* 《无题》, 1983.
Oil on canvas.

close to a number of artists, particularly with Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun, who all shared the affiliation with the STA. These avant-garde artists formed a small circle in the Shanghai art community in the early 1980s. Communication between them was kept strictly private and personal due to the political censorship. Zhang recalled a period when they were both teaching at the STA and studying English together, exchanging reading lists from traditional Daoism to newly published science books such as the *Towards the Future* series and discussing questions from their readings. Chen showed a great interest in oracle bone scripts when Zhang was exploring and producing a series of works on this subject in 1980.⁷⁷⁰ This early interest contributed to Chen's conceiving his later work *Jue Chang, Fifty Strokes to*

⁷⁷⁰ Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 November 2004). See the discussion on the *Towards the Future* series publication in Chapter 3.

Earth (1998), which revolves around the form of the “鼎 *ding*” character on the oracle bones.⁷⁷¹ The period Zhang referred to was one of transition for Chen as he departed from his past work which had been largely influenced by modernist art styles and entered into a new interest in abstraction. It was also a transition period for Li Shan after a visit to a pre-historical rock art site General’s Cliff (将军崖) with Zhang.⁷⁷² Unlike Zhang, whose interest was in Chinese oracle bone scripts, Li was inspired by rock art. He also moved from impressionist style images to a series of primitive expressionist paintings with motifs inspired by rock art, and in between he was also exploring abstract art.⁷⁷³ Chen’s work *Untitled* clearly contains many of the elements or subjects which his contemporaries in Shanghai such as Zhang and Li were also experimenting with. One can sense the creative capacity and energy in Chen’s paintings at this time. A new artistic direction from the artist could be predicted. Thus, the arrival of the *Floating Qi* series of paintings in the following years was the result of Chen’s artistic explorations in the period from 1981 to 1984.⁷⁷⁴ (Figure 105, 106.)

Chen Zhen’s art production from the 1980s into the 1990s was highly original, earnest and prolific, and led to an invaluable body of artworks. Chen’s art was informed by a very personal perspective and the notion of meditation as a curative process in art was one of the main themes in his art, which he acknowledged originated from the diagnosis of a serious illness in 1981.⁷⁷⁵ He became, as noted earlier, deeply interested in the traditional Chinese

⁷⁷¹ In a dialogue with the French artist Daniel Buren, Chen discussed his inspiration from the Chinese hieroglyphic character of “Ding” in creating the form of this important work. See Chen Zhen and Daniel Buren, *Conversation: Chen Zhen and Daniel Buren* (Chinese), at <http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/artist/txt_ab/82dbst/081izBm>, viewed 20 March 2016. Listed in the bibliography of ADAC (Association des Amis de Chen Zhen) website: *Chen Zhen, Éloge de la magie noire*, GAM—Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin: Hopefmonster, 2000, p. 144; *Conversation avec Chen Zhen*, Giovanni Maria Pace, Alessandra Pace, « Conversation autour de l’éloge de la Magie noire », p. 58-65; « Conversation entre Daniel Buren et Chen Zhen », p. 119-133. <<https://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/page.php?id=12>>, viewed on 30 October 2017.

⁷⁷² This pre-historical site General’s Cliff [将军崖] is in the Lianyung Harbour 连云港 area in Jiangsu province. See previous mentions in Chapters 3 and 4.

⁷⁷³ See the relevant discussions on Zhang Jianjun and Li Shan in Chapters 3 and 4. Also see Zhang Jianjun, Interview by Lansheng Zhang; Li Shan, Interview by Lansheng Zhang.

⁷⁷⁴ The second volume of *The ’85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources* edited by Gao Minglu and published in 2008 showed four images of Chen Zhen’s work produced between 1981 to 1984. In my view, the images in both Gao’s publications illustrate clearly the progression of Chen Zhen’s artistic explorations from the impressionist and expressionist styles towards abstraction. (See in Gao Minglu, et al., *The ’85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, Vol.02, pp.233-234.)

⁷⁷⁵ Chen Zhen spoke openly about his illness in relation to his world view and art. For example, he talked about an important concept of “transexperiences” that related to his personal illness at the conference during his participation of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Queensland Art Gallery in 1999. (See Chen Zhen’s presentation in Caroline Turner and Morris Low, eds. *Beyond the Future: Papers from the*



Figure 105. Chen Zhen, *Floating Qi No.3*, 1984.
Oil on canvas.



Figure 106. Chen Zhen, *Floating Qi No.4*, 1984.
Oil on canvas.

philosophy of Daoism, modern Western philosophies and science in the early 1980s, and especially the holistic approach of Chinese traditional medicine with its emphasis on internal healing. Chen's exploration of these ideas took place in the first half of the 1980s in Shanghai and was also imbued with personal experiences that gradually translated into his art practice at that time. Critics have agreed that his series of abstract paintings *Floating Qi*, created from 1984 to 1985, is the result of this intellectual process.⁷⁷⁶ The *Floating Qi* series was shown to the public at the *Shanghai Art Museum New Building Completion Exhibition* (opening 9 October 1986) and was followed by Chen's first solo exhibition at the STA Art Gallery (26 October to 2 November 1986). (See Figure 46.) This exhibition included still life

Conference of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1999), p.167.) Chen Zhen's wife Xu Ming, an artist and his long-term collaborator, played a critical role in Chen Zhen's life, artistic career, and continues to realise Chen's unrealised concepts for projects. After Chen Zhen passed away in 2000, Xu Ming has been collaborating with curators and art institutions as well as producing documentation of Chen Zhen's art. (See Xu Ming, *Chen Zhen* (Changchun: Jilin Fine Arts Publishing House, 2006).

⁷⁷⁶ For example, see Wu Liang, "Paintings connect through Spirituality: I observe Chen Zhen's Floating Qi." (1986) in *Visual Art*, Shanghai, 1987; Gao Minglu, et al., *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*.

oil paintings and portraits in the impressionist and expressionist styles as well as abstract works such as the *Floating Qi* series.⁷⁷⁷ In his first solo exhibition, the didactic panel included Chen's prologue titled "艺术手札" [Artistic Autography] that expounded his thinking and the rationale behind the works. He defined the "image motivation" (图形动机) as a mediation between his thinking derived from the concept in Daoism of "emptiness" (空) and "nothingness or nihility" (无) expressed in his art. He explained this creative process as "a psychic accumulation active in the natural outflow of instinctive consciousness" and "the soul of abstract language." Through this process, he was searching for "a language to communicate between the origin of the universe and the human heart."⁷⁷⁸ Chen's explanation reflected accurately on this creative process, and these ideas resonated with some in his circle of friends including Zhang Jianjun and Yu Youhan who shared similar interests and were also searching for a new artistic language in that period.⁷⁷⁹ The exhibition was well received by the local avant-garde art community and critics. The critic Wu Liang described the paintings as having a connection "with divinity" and remarked that he found himself in a transcendent space among them when he visited the exhibition. Wu defined the *Floating Qi* series as a kind of "recording of a special process" that "recorded feeling and contemplation," rather than being a "narrative of some ideological results," or a "past psychological experience."⁷⁸⁰ This process of converting his thoughts into "image motivation" has been identified as a turning point in Chen's creative practice in his paintings.⁷⁸¹ It became a critical factor in Chen's art that enabled him to turn his deep inner thoughts into communicative visual perceptions.

The *Floating Qi* series was produced with layers of heavy oil paint on large canvas panels in subtle variations and tones of black and white colours. The long panel in each painting, together with the dark and light colours, form a channel, perhaps a human body, that represents the universe where the "气" (qi - air/energy) is floating, rising or descending, diffusing or condensing. The first set of *Floating Qi* in the series consists of three panels. The left and right-hand panels feature Chinese characters and Dao religious symbols that look

⁷⁷⁷ *ibid.* pp.222-223.

⁷⁷⁸ Original Chinese text: "作为一种心里的积淀活跃于本能意识的自然外流之中." English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. (See original Chinese text reproduced in Gao Minglu, et al., *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.220-223.)

⁷⁷⁹ See discussion in Chapters 3, 4, 5.

⁷⁸⁰ Wu Liang, "Paintings connect through spirituality: I observe Chen Zhen's Floating Qi" (1986) in *Visual Art*, Shanghai, 1987, p.30. Translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly. Wu Liang has played an important role in the art discourse, especially in the avant-garde art scene in Shanghai in the 1980s. His important role was discussed in Chapter 1 as well as being reflected through the artists' case studies in Chapters 3, 4, 5.

⁷⁸¹ See Wu Liang, "Paintings connect through spirituality: I observe Chen Zhen's Floating Qi;" and subsequently in Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.220.

similar and are painted in a light colour against a dark background. The centre canvas has the image of an imperfect round form created with patterns of brush strokes. There are two distinctive light and dark brush strokes on the top right-hand side corner and the lower left-hand side corner that suggest the directions of the floating qi. (Figure 107.) This early piece displays the artistic interests and intellectual inclination of the artist prior to the creation of this series.



Figure 107. Chen Zhen, *Floating Qi No. 1*, 1984. Oil on canvas.

Chen Zhen's philosophical studies and his art related to those studies were recorded in Gao Minglu and co-authors' book on the 1985 art movement published in 1991. What is important about this book is that it helps to reveal the thinking, through commentary and images, of several avant-garde artists in Shanghai as well as Chen from the early to mid-1980s under the rubric of the '85 Movement. All modern philosophical theories from the West, except Marxist theory, were rejected by the Chinese Communist Party after 1949.⁷⁸² In the 1980s, no matter the age or artistic differences between artists, the study or knowledge of philosophy — whether traditional or modern, Eastern or Western — was considered absolutely necessary for developing an individual artistic language as a basis to break with the official art establishment. Chen was no exception. In his book, Gao comments that Chen Zhen "realized clearly that the true modern art is built on the base of modern philosophy, modern thinking, and modern knowledge structure."⁷⁸³ However, I would argue,

⁷⁸² In the artist case studies in this thesis, I have discussed the importance of the artists' breadth of reading in the 1980s which included Western modern philosophical theories.

⁷⁸³ Gao Minglu, et al., *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p.220. The original Chinese text as "他清楚地认识到，真正的现代艺术是建立在现代哲学、现代思维方式与现代知识结构之上的。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

Gao's analysis neglects the essential element underpinning this "modern thinking" and "modern knowledge structure" in Chen Zhen's art, namely the spirit of individualism which I have argued was a distinctive quality in avant-garde thinking and art practices in Shanghai in the 1980s and was manifested in a challenge to the status quo and officially sanctioned art.

Chen Zhen's artistic explorations and his insightful writings on his own work, and on the issues concerning avant-garde art at the time, played an important role in invigorating the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the mid-1980s. Chen expressed his views widely, including through writing, exhibiting and curating.⁷⁸⁴ Such artist commentaries on the state of affairs I have described in Chapter 1 as the "studio discourse" in Shanghai.⁷⁸⁵ Chen was one of the guest curators for the important inaugural exhibition of the Shanghai Art Museum in 1986. His engagement with other artists and his art produced at the time such as the *Floating Qi* series were major contributions to avant-garde art developments in Shanghai and China at large. The year 1986 is generally recognised as a high point of avant-garde art activities in China.⁷⁸⁶ It was also a milestone in Chen Zhen's artistic career, marked by two key exhibitions in Shanghai: an exhibition of his own work at an alternative art space for the STA; and the inaugural Shanghai Art Museum exhibition. In mid-December of that year, Chen was ready to embrace the international contemporary art world and left Shanghai to undertake study at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Chen Zhen's time as an artist in Shanghai I argue laid the foundation for his international artistic career in the 1990s and helped to bridge a gap between the contemporary art community in China and abroad. In a conversation published in 2000 with French artist Daniel Buren, Chen explained the influences of "foreign culture" and "native culture" in his artworks and cited his thirty-one years living in the former French concession area of Shanghai, his training in traditional carving techniques (with ivory and jade, or on clay and wood) and Western sculpture skills developed at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts School, as well as his tertiary study in stage art (set design).⁷⁸⁷ Chen coined the term "transexperiences" in 1996, as a term that "summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one's native

⁷⁸⁴ For example, Chen Zhen wrote a letter to Gao Minglu and attached his texts and the materials of his artworks on 14 October 1986. (See in Gao Minglu, et al., *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, pp.232-234).

⁷⁸⁵ See in Chapter 1 under the heading of "National discourse, local voice: Contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s."

⁷⁸⁶ See previous discussion in Chapter 1.

⁷⁸⁷ Chen Zhen, "Conversation between Daniel Buren and Chen Zhen," in *In Praise of Black Magic*, (Turin: Hopefmonster, 2000), pp.119-13.

place and going from one place to another in one's life."⁷⁸⁸ He expounded that "transexperiences" also represented a concept of art:

This is not a pure conceptual concept; rather, it is an impure experiential concept, a mode of thinking and method of artistic creation that is capable of connecting the preceding with the following, adapting itself to changing circumstances, accumulating year-in-year-out experiences, and [capable of] being triggered at any instant. Furthermore, this type of experiential concept relates to an extremely important matter, that is, to immerse oneself in life, to blend and identify oneself with others.⁷⁸⁹

Chen Zhen's contributions to a philosophy of contemporary art together with his creative art have been recognised by both Chinese and international art critics. He has been represented in major exhibitions and in critical literature on international contemporary art as well as on contemporary Chinese art.⁷⁹⁰ In February 2003, not long after his death in 2000, the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York mounted a retrospective exhibition to pay tribute to Chen Zhen's artistic life and achievements. He has also been represented in a number of other exhibitions, including the 2017 major survey exhibition at the Guggenheim

⁷⁸⁸ Chen Zhen, "Transexperiences: a conversation between Chen Zhen and Zhu Xian" (Kyoto, Japan: Korinsha Press, 1998). Also see online at <<https://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/page.php?id=32>>, viewed July 3, 2016. In this conversation with Zhu Xian in 1996, Chen Zhen explained: "Transexperiences. In Chinese, it can be called 'Rongchao jingyan' (融超经验). This is a kind of 'fusion-transcendence of experiences.' There isn't such a word in either English or French, but the prefix 'trans-' has the meanings of 'crossing,' 'through,' 'above and beyond,' 'transfer,' 'over,' 'to the other side of,' etc. If you juxtapose this prefix with the word 'experience' and use it in the plural form, you coined a new word, which summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one's native place and going from one place to another in one's life. [...]" Chen left his native Shanghai at the end of 1986 and was based in France after that. In his participation in international art exhibitions, as in the nature of his art installations, he travelled and worked as artist-in-residence widely. The list of exhibitions in Chen's CV is the best indication of how many countries he lived and worked in. See in the L'ADAC (Association Des Amis de Chen Zhen) website <<https://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/home.php>>, viewed 28/10/2017.

⁷⁸⁹ Chen Zhen, "Transexperiences: a conversation between Chen Zhen and Zhu Xian" (1998). Also see online at <<https://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/page.php?id=32>>, viewed July 3, 2016.

⁷⁹⁰ For example, the discussions of Chen's work in Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.220-223; David Rosenberg and Xu Ming, *Invocation of Washing Fire* (Prato: Gli Oril, 2003); Hou Hanru, "Strategy of Survival in the Third Space: A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s" in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu, exh.cat (New York: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, 1998); Gilane Tawadros, *Changing State: Contemporary Art and Ideas in an Era of Globalism*, (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004); Jérôme Sans, *Chen Zhen, Les entretiens*, (Dijon : Le press du réel, 2003); Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Conversations*, (Paris : Centre national des arts plastiques et M/M, Manuella Éditions, 2007); Richard Vine, *New China new art*, (Munich : Prestel, 2008); Caroline Turner, ed., *Art and Social Change – Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005); Michael Petry, *The Art of not making: The new artist/artisan relationship*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 2011).

Museum, *Art in China after 1989: Theater of the World*.⁷⁹¹ International audiences are most familiar with Chen's large installations such as *Round Table* (1995) or *Round Table: side-by-side* (1997), *Jue Chang, Fifty Strokes to Earth* (1998)/*Jue Chang – Dancing Body/Drumming Mind (The Last Song)* (1999), *Crucible of Washing Fire* (1999) among others. The *Round Table* has two versions: both were constructed with wooden round table(s), embedded in and surrounded by Chinese or Western-style chairs. Chen Zhen created the early piece of *Round Table* (1995) to commemorate the United Nation's 50th anniversary. It has a rotating wooden part ("lazy Susan" in Western terminology) in the centre of the table which immediately evokes a link to Chinese culture. The later piece *Round Table - side by side* (1997) features a similar table placed next to a plain round table that hints at a different culture(s) or notionally Western culture. On top of the rotating wooden piece, the artist engraved five Chinese characters which read "Permanent Misunderstanding" (永久的误会).

Chen Zhen's works after he left China in 1986 are mainly concerned with identities, Eastern and Western cultural conflict and misunderstanding, world peace and the human condition, as responses to living in different cultural environments and in relation to his idea of "transexperiences." With this idea, he was consciously attempting "to push myself into a re-self-marginalisation process" by working and living "out of a traditional western context" for a period of time in a year.⁷⁹² His later works are often, like the earlier *Qi* series, imbued with philosophy and a paradoxical language that was also typical of the avant-garde art in the 1980s in Shanghai.⁷⁹³ The strategy he adopted after 1989 was, as Chen has said, to use

⁷⁹¹ P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, *Chen Zhen: A Tribute*, exh cat. (New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2003). See also Alexandra Munroe (with Philip Tinari and Hou Hanru) *Art in China after 1989: Theater of the World* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017).

⁷⁹² See a discussion of Chen Zhen's notion of "Transexperiences" in footnote 785. In his participation at the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in the Queensland Art Gallery in 1999, Chen Zhen expounded the idea of "transexperiences" developed in relation to his personal illness to the international audiences at the exhibition's conference: "I think the issue is not to refuse passively such a kind of sickness. The question is how to turn such negative points and negative elements into a very dynamic way of living and thinking. For several years I have developed ideas and practice around work called 'transexperiences'. That means I take part in a generation who have spent ten years during the Cultural Revolution, ten years during Chinese reform, Chinese opening, and now over ten years in the western context especially, travelling on the different continents. So I think in the space of myself there's a kind of meeting dialogue, sometimes a conflict, between my own experiences, so this is a first crossing experience in myself." He then goes on: "The second 'transexperiences' is each meeting with others. I try to through this practice, this idea of 'transexperiences', to push myself into a re-self-marginalisation process, that means I try to work, live, spend several months every year out of a traditional western context." See in Caroline Turner and Morris Low, eds. *Beyond the Future: Papers from the Conference of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, p.167.

⁷⁹³ Two examples are the installation *Crucible of Washing Fire*, initially created for the *Third Shanghai Biennale* exhibition in 1996 and the work *Jue Chang, Fifty Strokes to Earth*, that Chen produced at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art in 1998. In conversation with French artist Daniel

art installations and art projects to improve situations “based on his ‘transexperiences’ as someone living between the East and the West.”⁷⁹⁴ From a discussion of the Chinese character “*zou* 走” [walk], Chen used a phrase “Spiritual running-away” to expound the concept of “transexperiences”:

Exactly. Spiritual running-away. This is the most profound experience one can have in life. One should learn to break out of one's own "cocoon," and be courageous enough to "break away from one's own self," and to "abandon" one's own cultural context. The Chinese proverb "the soul has left its shelter" in fact symbolizes a critical state in which one's creative capacity has reached the most active zenith. The experience of "zou" and the excitement of creative work are all related to this type of experiences. Of course, "spiritual running-away" also has relevance to the issue of self-sought loneliness. For the past few years, "the self-sought loneliness of opening-up and moving-about" is the mainstay by which I was able to "zou" and to live.⁷⁹⁵

Chen's major installation work, *Jue Chang, Fifty Strokes to Earth*, also related to the themes of the *Round Table* works and was first realised in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 1998 and subsequently displayed at the Arsenale in the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999. It offers the audience dramatic yet meditative visual and physical encounters with the work. The large installation consists of many drums made from a collection of furniture and chairs from different countries and regions in the world. The artist invited the audience to participate and to hit the drums with batons or guns. At the same time, the artist also invited Tibetan lamas to use the drums for chants and prayers. After a while, various drumming rhythms gradually came together as one. Through this process the artist incorporated the “more dramatic performance way to show regional political conflicts, the internal contradictions between man and society and other profound problems,” and suggested “the spirituality to transcend the reality of the contradictions’ in realisation of his dream that art can change human emotions from violence and hatred to calm and peace.”⁷⁹⁶ The audience's participation in this transformative process completed his work. Chen Zhen also stated that “drumming was a treatment/therapy, a kind of self-punishment and self-warning; only when

Buren, Chen noted how human conflict in the present day had had a strong impact on him. See in

“Conversation between Daniel Buren and Chen Zhen,” (2000) (谈话录：陈箴与丹尼尔·布伦).

<http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/artist/txt_ab/82dbst/081izBm>, viewed 20 March 2016.

⁷⁹⁴ Hou Hanru, “Strategy of Survival in the Third Space: A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s,” pp.183-189.

⁷⁹⁵ Chen Zhen and Zhu Xian, “Transexperiences: A Conversation between Chen Zhen and Zhu Xian,” tran. William Y. Jiang <<https://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/page.php?id=32>>, viewed 04 May 2016.

⁷⁹⁶ See in Hou Hanru, “Dialogue with the Interior Landscape of the Body: A Tribute to Chen Zhen” (当城市与身体内部景观对话之时及其它,) <http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/artist/txt_ab/82dbst/c53esvn>, viewed 05 May 2016.

the audience was drumming, the work was completed.”⁷⁹⁷ The visual structure of this installation was inspired by the Chinese character “鼎 Ding,” which is the name of a ceremonial vessel and a symbol of power from the Chinese Bronze Age. His residual interest in the oracle bone scripts in the early 1980s appears to have led Chen to this visual concept.⁷⁹⁸ (Figure 108)



Figure 108. Chen Zhen, *Jue Chang, Fifty Strokes to Earth*, 1998. Installation.

Many ideas and artworks in Chen’s later art are closely linked to his early life in Shanghai, allowing him to explore the materials used in his art from their original functions and meanings in dialogue with global contemporary issues. For example, in a response to China’s or broadly Asia’s economic imperatives, Chen created the installation *Crucible of Washing Fire* that consists of a large number of abacus beads, old wooden chamber pots from Shanghai households, and broken computers or electronic accessories. In this artwork, the artist was questioning the speed of economic changes and urbanisation, and at the same time offering as he stated a “medical-alchemical treatment for the inner disease of Asia’s success and its crises.”⁷⁹⁹ This installation was initially created for the *Third Shanghai Biennale* exhibition in 1996 and caused a major scandal as officialdom perceived the use of

⁷⁹⁷ Chen Zhen, “Conversation between Daniel Buren and Chen Zhen,” (2000) (谈话录：陈箴与丹尼尔·布伦). English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁷⁹⁸ *ibid.* Chen has said that he discovered the character’s inherent architectural quality and incorporated it into his installation. This large installation presented a strong message as well as physical and visual experiences to the audiences on the issues of political, regional, and societal conflicts between people against a background of concurrent wars in the Middle East and Kosovo.

⁷⁹⁹ Chen Zhen quoted in Caroline Turner “Art and Social Change” in Caroline Turner, ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), p.3.

these old wooden chamber pots in his art as being offensive to the political and social environment. The contested negotiation between the artist and the curatorial team at the Shanghai Art Museum finally reached a compromise in which the curatorial team was permitted to find similar newly made wooden chamber pots to replace the old chamber pots. The 1996 Shanghai Biennale was Chen's first opportunity to show his work in China since he had moved overseas. Ironically, this work was shown in its original composition ten years later at the same place in the Shanghai Art Museum (2006) for the first retrospective exhibition of his work in his hometown. It was also selected to be shown in the *Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (APT3) at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1999 and was purchased by the Gallery. In a recorded video interview, Chen explained that his work was intended "to reflect certain realities in most Asian countries" with his "personal experiences from his native city of Shanghai" about "what is old [and] what is new? What is traditional [and] what is contemporary? What is oriental [and] what is occidental?"⁸⁰⁰ Chen Zhen's art was a transition from oil painting in the late 1980s to an opus of art installations which included the recurring appearance of objects from daily life such as beds and chairs in mixed Chinese and Western styles. These objects played a significant role in carrying and translating the artist's thinking, emotions, concerns, and hopes for the future. Those objects are what Chen called "materials," metaphors and symbolic gestures in his attempt to bridge different cultures, to link past and present, and individuals to broader communities. They are instrumental in implementing the artist's stated belief that art can be a process of solving humanity's problems and improving the human condition by using spiritual healing to overcome the realities of conflict. In a foreword for Chen Zhen's first retrospective exhibition in Shanghai in 2006, the museum curator Zhang Qing noted:

[...] Chen Zhen said that Chinese culture is an unchangeable gene. His artistic practice was always associated with his daily life in and historical memory of Shanghai. He paid great attention to observing and recording the details of life in Shanghai and could discover artistic meaning in everyday objects. This meaning is the artistic form of the artist's subjective endowment and transformation.⁸⁰¹

Chen Zhen's thinking and work had a broad vision concerned with humanity. In this sphere, he offered in his art his own recipes for the improvement of the human condition in

⁸⁰⁰ See "Chen Zhen: Invocation of Washing Fire," APT3, Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, 1999. <<http://tv.qagoma.qld.gov.au/2012/11/29/apt3-chen-zhen-artist-interview/>>, viewed 20 October 2017.

⁸⁰¹ The original Chinese text: "走得再远，陈箴说，中国文化是永远无法改变的基因。陈箴的艺术实践永远与他上海的日常生活和历史记忆相联系，他非常注意观察和记录上海的生活细节，并能从日常物品中发现艺术的意义，这种意义正是艺术家主观赋予和转化的艺术形式。" See in Zhang Qing, "Transcendence," *A Foreword for Chen Zhen's Art Exhibition, Chen Zhen* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, [Shanghai Bookstore Press], 2006). English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

a language that was very personal yet universal in its appeal to a wide range of audiences in different countries. As Chen Zhen explained on many occasions, and as discussed earlier in this chapter, the artist's life and art education in Shanghai had left indelible marks on his artistic career.⁸⁰² After a first survey exhibition of Chen's work at the Shanghai Art Museum in 2006, the Rockbund Art Museum (RAM) in Shanghai presented another large exhibition titled *Chen Zhen: Without going to New York and Paris, life could be internationalised* in 2015.⁸⁰³ Both exhibitions focused on Chen's work from 1990 to 2000 and shared some of the major themes that appeared throughout his art. The exhibitions noted the importance of Shanghai in Chen's artistic journey, and marked the association between his artistic concerns in the 1990s and the place where he grew up. The exhibition at the RAM explored further the research and process of critical thinking in Chen Zhen's work and how the artist expressed his concerns through personal experiences in relation to two main subjects: "transexperience" and the "city."⁸⁰⁴ As the exhibition curator Hou Hanru pointed out:

This exhibition, first of all, is to think about Chen Zhen's work and current Chinese reality. Because Shanghai and its relationship with the artist is a very important foundation in forming Chen Zhen's ideas. His experience growing up in Shanghai was a very important starting point for his later thinking on interrelated issues in France.⁸⁰⁵

Although Hou acknowledged the significance of the Shanghai experience in Chen Zhen's thinking and his art, the exhibition did not include any work produced by Chen in Shanghai before he moved overseas in the mid 1980s. From the art discourse in general, there is a lack of an in-depth study of Chen Zhen's early life experience and his work in Shanghai in the 1980s. While some critics have appreciated the links in Chen's work and thinking and world view to his upbringing in Shanghai, including Hou, this aspect has nevertheless been neglected in most discussions of his work. The RAM's exhibition in 2015 once again revealed this gap by concentrating on the period after he left China. The aim of this thesis is precisely to fill this critical gap by demonstrating the importance of the legacy of modernism from the

⁸⁰² See the earlier discussions in this chapter on the significance of his life there and the cultural influence of Shanghai in Chen Zhen's artistic creative process.

⁸⁰³ Li Qi 李棋, ed., *Chen Zhen: without going to New York and Paris, life could be internationalized*, exh cat. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015). <http://primo.getty.edu/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=GRI&search_scope=default_scope&docId=GETTY_ALMA21170506290001551&fn=permalink>, viewed September 8th, 2016.

⁸⁰⁴ Hou Hanru, "我们不属于任何一个地方 [We Do Not Belong to Anywhere]," in 艺术新闻 2015 年 07 期 [Art Monthly, No.07 2015], pp.25-30.

⁸⁰⁵ *ibid.* The original quotation in Chinese: "这次展览, 先是去思考陈箴的作品跟现在中国现实之间的关系, 因为陈箴在上海的关系是构成他整个思路的一个很重要的基础。他在上海长大的经验是他后来在法国思考一些相关问题的很重要的出发点。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

early twentieth century in Shanghai to the development of Chen's art as well as the significance of the Shanghai spirit of individualism in Chen's work.

In the section of this chapter related to Chen Zhen I have argued that Chen's experiences as an artist in Shanghai in the 1980s laid the foundation for his influential international artistic career in the 1990s. Many ideas and artworks in Chen's later art are closely related to his early life in Shanghai, including his exploration in many installations of Chinese materials placed in dialogue with global contemporary issues. I have also argued that Chen's work in the 1980s as well as later in his career exemplified the spirit of individualism which was so much a part of the intellectual art milieu in Shanghai and in particular of avant-garde art in Shanghai in that decade. This was forcefully demonstrated in his impressive intellectual critique in his essay published in Shanghai in 1987 of what he saw as the dangers of group consciousness. In that essay he calls for the elevation of "individual consciousness" which he described at that time as the primary requisite for the revitalisation of Chinese modern art.⁸⁰⁶

Cai Guoqiang

Cai Guoqiang made his reputation in the international contemporary art world in the 1990s with his large-scale installations, especially gunpowder explosion works. Key gunpowder explosion works include *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No.10* (1993), *Horizon from the Pan-Pacific: Project for Extraterrestrials No.14* (1994), *Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century* (1996), among many others. He has exhibited his art in many of the most important international art events such as Biennales as well as in art institutions around the world. His oeuvre also includes other works beyond the explosion works for which he is so well known. One of his best-known installations that did not include gunpowder is *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows* (草船借箭), first shown in 1998 at the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre and Asia Society, New York, and curated by Gao Minglu; and later shown at NAMOC, Beijing in the exhibition of *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe* curated by Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe in 2008.⁸⁰⁷ This large installation

⁸⁰⁶ See the discussion on Chen's critical writing in the beginning of this section.

⁸⁰⁷ *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art* as discussed earlier in this thesis was a major contemporary Chinese art exhibition held outside China in the 1990s. It was first shown at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York, then travelled to the San Francisco Museum of Contemporary Art and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (1999), the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Monterrey (1999), the Tacoma Art Museum and the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (1999-2000), the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (2000). See Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco, New York: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, 1998).

consists of a structure of an ancient Chinese wooden boat covered with feathered arrows hanging high in a confined space at the P.S.1 Art Center. The title refers to a story from the third century in China.⁸⁰⁸ The natural materials used in the installation stand in stark contrast to the high-tech metal and plastic materials, and products of industrial waste popular with many Western artists during this period. Together with knowledge derived from an ancient Chinese story, the installation presented a fresh artistic language in the contemporary art arena of the time. To people familiar with Chinese classical literature this installation gave rise to layers of interpretation.⁸⁰⁹ The work well illustrates the witty, playful yet philosophical characteristics of Cai's art, as well as the way he engages with Chinese cultural heritage "to comment on contemporary transcultural issues."⁸¹⁰

Cai's multifaceted art has drawn the attention of art critics from both the international art community and China since the late 1980s. Much analysis of his art has focused on the period after his move to Japan in the late 1980s to the present. In following Cai's artistic trajectory there are a number of texts and interviews with the artist and exhibition catalogue essays that cover Cai's artistic career in the 1980s before he moved to Japan, which provide valuable material. Among these resources is an interview conducted by Fei Dawei in 1999 and published in English in 2000, and three exhibition catalogue essays by Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe in 2008, Wu Hung in 2009, and David Elliott in 2010.⁸¹¹

⁸⁰⁸ *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows* (草船借箭): "The title—which alludes to a text from the third century (known as *Sanguozhi*)—refers to an episode in which the General, Zhu Gelian 诸葛亮, facing an imminent attack from the enemy, manages to replenish a depleted store of arrows. According to legend, Zhu Gelian tricked the enemy by sailing across the Yangtze river through the thick mist of early dawn with a surrogate army made of straw, while his soldiers remained behind yelling and beating on drums. Mistaking the pandemonium for a surprise attack, the enemy showered the decoys with volleys of arrows. Thus the General returned triumphantly with a freshly captured store of weapons." (See Publication excerpt from *The Museum of Modern Art, MoMA Highlights*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, revised 2004, originally published 1999, p. 362.), < <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/8134>>, viewed 28 January 2019.)

⁸⁰⁹ See for example Chen Danqing, "草船借箭" [A Preface: *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*] in Yang Zhao and Li Weiqing, ed. *Cai Guoqiang: This is what I think* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), pp.14-19. Chen commented: "它来自纽约语境难以测知的另一维度，是一份因果置换的文本，一场角色变易的游戏，古老的传说，船与箭，巧智交作，在蔡国强手中，也在纽约，成为一则正喻而反讽的寓言。" [It comes from another dimension that is difficult to predict in the context of New York. It is a text of the interchange of cause and effect, a game of changing roles, ancient legends, boats and arrows, and ingenuity. In Cai Guoqiang's hands, and in New York, it has become a parable and ironic fable.] English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.)

⁸¹⁰ See Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity: An Overview of Inside Out: New Chinese Art," *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exh. cat. ed. Gao Minglu (San Francisco, New York: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, 1998), p.34.

⁸¹¹ See Fei Dawei, "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing," *Cai Guo-Qiang*, exh.cat. ed. Fei Dawei (London: Thames & Hudson; Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2000), pp.117–135; Alexandra Munroe, "Early Works," in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*, exh. cat. Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe (New York:

These important writings on Cai's art have identified a critical period when Cai was an art student at the STA in Shanghai from 1981 to 1985 and will be discussed later in this chapter. For example, in the catalogue for the retrospective exhibition of Cai Guoqiang's art *I Want to Believe* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2008, Alexandra Munroe, the Museum's senior curator, points out that Cai's works in this period demonstrate "his progressive search for a practice of art making that is radically and profoundly experimental."⁸¹² Wu Hung in his exhibition catalogue essay "Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflection on Cai Guoqiang's Gunpowder Painting" in 2009 argues that the gunpowder paintings have a special position in his art as the "only art form that he has consistently employed and developed during his entire career."⁸¹³ The social and political conditions and the gunpowder — the material itself and its historical and symbolic meanings in Chinese culture — are the focus of Wu's analysis. In tracing the beginning of Cai's experimental period back to his study at the STA, Wu states in a footnote that, "in particular, the Shanghai Academy of Drama was a hotbed of contemporary art in the early 1980s." He further comments that "some of its young faculty members organised one of the earliest art exhibitions in post-Cultural Revolution China to place artistic pursuits above political ideology."⁸¹⁴ Although Wu did not mention the name of the exhibition, from my understanding, he was referring to the '83 *Periodical Experimental Art Exhibition* and I have discussed this in Chapter 1.⁸¹⁵

Cai lived in Shanghai in the first half of the 1980s when avant-garde art was still an emerging notion in China. It was during this period that Cai's professional artistic career underwent a transformation in forming his ideas and practices. While others have analysed the philosophic and cultural meanings of Cai's artistic visual vocabularies there has not been as much attention given to his period of study in Shanghai. This period in Shanghai was an

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2008), pp.1-2; Wu Hung, "Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang's Gunpowder Painting," in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Hanging Out in the Museum*, exh.cat. (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2009), pp.67-89; David Elliott, "Between Heaven and Earth: Space and Time in The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang" in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Fallen Blossoms*, exh.cat. (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2010), pp.30-49.

⁸¹² Alexandra Munroe, "Early Works," in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*, p.1.

⁸¹³ Wu Hung, "Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang's Gunpowder Painting," p.69. Cai's work with gunpowder burned-marks on canvas and paper have been often called drawings. Without providing a definition on why he calls these "gunpowder paintings," instead, Wu discussed "The Beginning" of Cai's experiments when he was an art student at STA in 1984 in which "[...] he finally focused on the potential of gunpowder as a painting material." From my reading, this is Wu's premise in considering Cai's gunpowder works on canvas and paper as "gunpowder paintings." See in Wu Hung, "Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang's Gunpowder Painting," p.70.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.89. In Wu Hung's essay the importance of the STA on Cai Guoqiang's experimentation is explicit. However, MOMA's publication *Contemporary Chinese Art Primary Documents*, edited by Wu, did not include Cai's relationship with the STA.

⁸¹⁵ See my discussion relating to the '83 *Periodical Experimental Art Exhibition* in Chapters 1, 3, 4.

important juncture in Cai's creative development. I will demonstrate in this thesis the nuanced way that Cai has drawn from his Shanghai experience and helped him develop a deeper understanding of individualism in contemporary art. I will investigate the influences of the cultural milieu of Shanghai, and his training at the STA where his study of art methodology enabled him to develop and reassess his practice. In doing so, this thesis pays particular attention to the statements on individualism that Cai has repeatedly stressed during interviews and public lectures, and stated that he acted as a loner outside of art trends and movements to explore the new possibilities in the 1980s before he went to Japan in 1986.⁸¹⁶ In a recent publication (2016) *What about the Art? – Contemporary Art from China*, Cai contributed an article titled "Talk Talk What About The Art" which discusses the issue of individualism and states:

Despite having studied so much from the West, contemporary Chinese artists have failed to incorporate the values of individualism. Most Chinese art arises from collective consciousness. [...]

The reason the Chinese have never managed to understand individualism is that the individualism of the West has deep roots that can be traced back to reactions against the repression inherent in the religious paradigms of the Middle Ages. Following the humanist revival of the Renaissance, a new civilization took form based in the advance of both material and democratic political culture. [...]

Chinese art lacks the universal spirit of humanism. As a form of respect for the individual, humanism allows dialogue between individuals as equals, trying to maximize the justice that can be achieved in a society. This kind of universal value cannot simply be replaced by the so-called ideal of the unity of mankind as advocated by socialism.

[...] If you have not learned the lesson of individualism passed down from the European Renaissance, then it is difficult to formulate an individual attitude, concept, and form for your art.⁸¹⁷

Cai's critique reflects his long-held belief that resonates with what I have termed in this thesis the spirit of individualism in Shanghai. I argue the critical period of his tertiary study in Shanghai in the early 1980s significantly contributed to the maturing of Cai's thinking and art practice. The art training he received at the STA, where he started his experimental art

⁸¹⁶ For examples, see in Fei Dawei. "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing"; Cai Guoqiang, "Shanghai Art Museum Art Lecture: Cai Guoqiang Talk about Art," Level 4 Lecture Theatre, Shanghai Art Museum, 03 February 2001. <<http://www.cnarts.net/shanghaiart/service/read.asp?id=111>>, viewed 12 May 2015.

⁸¹⁷ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Talk Talk What About The Art," pp.23-25.

practice, was an important foundation for the development of Cai's artistic career in later years.⁸¹⁸

The STA in the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s was a vibrant and open-minded art institution for young artists. The important role it played in the growth of contemporary art in Shanghai has been demonstrated earlier in this thesis.⁸¹⁹ This was directly the result of its special art environment as formed by a number of teachers and staff at the Academy. Cai began studying at the STA in 1981 when Chen Zhen was in his last year of study in the same department of Stage Art Design. In this department, the official academic training of the Soviet socialist realism model was challenged at that time by suppressed modernist practices.⁸²⁰ The cultural atmosphere at the STA in the 1980s, with its actors, scriptwriters, theatre directors, art teachers and their students all on one campus, presented the opportunity to embrace new ideas and practices that permeated all corners of the institution. Cai in his interview with Fei in 2000 described himself as having been in rebellion against his family of traditional Chinese artists in pursuing Western modern art before he entered the STA.⁸²¹ He saw his entry to the STA to study as "a work of destiny" in the search for his own artistic path.⁸²² With the influx of information on Western contemporary art and art theories in the early 1980s, Cai recognised the cultural and social differences between the West and China with regard to artistic production. He then took every opportunity to travel to many culturally significant places in China as his own way of learning and cultivating new forms of artistic expression. For example, he travelled to western China to visit Gansu (Dunhuang), Xinjiang and Tibet "to try to understand the macro structure and the majesty of nature, to find a way of doing things differently."⁸²³ Like Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun and Chen Zhen, who all had affiliations with the STA, Cai was also looking for inspiration from Chinese history, traditions and culture by visiting many historical sites. Some critics have suggested that Cai's travels in his university period were a conscious preparation for his move to study abroad and his subsequent departure from China to Japan in 1986.⁸²⁴ However, I would argue that his motive to travel in China was more likely driven by his search for individual artistic expressions outside the existing art forms.

⁸¹⁸ See Cai Guoqiang, "Shanghai Art Museum Art Lecture: Cai Guoqiang Talk about Art," Level 4 Lecture Theatre, Shanghai Art Museum, 03 February 2001.

⁸¹⁹ See in Chapters 1, 3, 4, and in the section on Chen Zhen earlier in this Chapter.

⁸²⁰ See my discussion in the Introduction and Chapter 1.

⁸²¹ See Fei Dawei, "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing," p.123. See also the discussion of Cai's family background in the following section of this chapter.

⁸²² *ibid.*

⁸²³ *ibid.*, p.124.

⁸²⁴ Yang Zhao, Li Wei-Qing, *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*, (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), p.47.

In 1984 when he was still studying at the STA, an experiment led to a significant breakthrough in his art practice and which later became his artistic signature. He for the first time lit the gunpowder from fireworks directly onto an oiled canvas that created unexpected, textured images from a flash explosion of fire. These spontaneous natural forces together with unpredictable, accidental, and uncontrollable elements have fascinated the artist ever since as his own statements reveal:

My fixation on this material comes from something fundamental, in essence. I want to explore the relationship between the powers of destruction and creation. Artists have always been attracted to and in awe of unpredictability, spontaneity, and uncontrollability. Sometimes these qualities can be social or conceptual. But sometimes they are very physical, biological, and emotional. The act of making gunpowder drawings is connected to a twenty-something-year interest in working two-dimensionally and to my childhood dream of becoming a painter.⁸²⁵

Between 1985 and 1986, before Cai moved to Japan, he produced a group of experimental two-dimensional works on canvas with oil paints, ink, beeswax (from candles) and gunpowder. For example, the oil painting *Typhoon* (1985), depicted nature as an unpredictable force — a subject that the artist has long had a fascination with. (Figure 109.) In this painting, Cai used an electric fan to blow oil paint in several directions as a whirling wind or cloud image on the canvas. By experimenting with gunpowder, oil paint, and ink on canvas, in the work *Chu Ba Wang* (1985), Cai created an historical figure made of ancient



Figure 109. Cai Guoqiang, *Typhoon*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 78 x 199 cm.

⁸²⁵ Yang Zhao, “Look! That Sophisticated Boy: Cai Guo-Qiang and His Art,” *Cai Guo-Qiang: Hanging Out in the Museum* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2009), p.274.

Chinese writing scripts that reflected his interest in Chinese mythology and folklore. (Figure 110.) The work titled *Shadow: Pray for Protection* (1985 -86), produced just before he moved to Japan, displayed his concerns about the aftermath of the atomic bomb dropped by the US



Figure 110. Cai Guoqiang, *Chu Ba Wang*, 1985. Gunpowder, ink, and oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 155 x 150 cm.

on the city of Nagasaki in Japan in 1945. Against a dark background, the image captured the building structures, dead bodies, torched figures, a flying B-29 bomber symbolising the atomic bomb, and a damaged clock.⁸²⁶ On the right-hand side of the canvas, in a spotlight, Cai's self-portrait emerged with a sympathetic gaze on the scene with a dove above to symbolise peace. (Figure 111) The importance of this period of Cai's work, as Munroe



Figure 111. *Shadow: Pray for Protection*, 1985-86. Gunpowder, ink, candle wax, and oil on canvas, 155 x 300 cm

⁸²⁶ Yang Zhao, et al., *Cai Guo-Qiang: Hanging Out in the Museum* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2009), p.158.

commented, was to “[...] display key themes that would later come to define the artist’s conceptual concerns.”⁸²⁷

While agreeing with Munroe’s assessment, I would suggest as well that Cai’s time at the STA in Shanghai also helped develop his use of a variety of materials and his extraordinary ability to engage the space and environment where his art projects take place which are an important part of the aesthetic construction of his art. Furthermore, the STA was an environment conducive to developing individual art methods and methodology.⁸²⁸ The ability to create a passage to a different sphere by engaging with the audience’s personal experiences and helping audiences to immerse themselves in the artwork can be found in both Cai’s and Chen Zhen’s later works. For example, Cai’s installation work *Fireworks from Heaven* (2001) exhibited in the *International Triennale of Contemporary Art: Mega Wave – Towards a New Synthesis 2001* in Yokohama, Japan, engages audiences to relate aspects of their own lives through this work. Cai set up a tent made of light white material like a mosquito net hanging from a very high ceiling and encircling a large space. Inside the tent colourful lights, like small fireworks, were suspended from the ceiling. Electric massage chairs were placed around the tent and audiences invited to lie down and relax. The installation provided a moment of fantasy and contemplative experiences in contrast to the fast pace of contemporary life. For Chinese people relaxing under the sky is a familiar summer night pastime, commonly known as Cheng Liang 乘凉.⁸²⁹ This practice has today almost disappeared with China’s rapid urbanisation but it is a practice Cai would have known especially from his early years at the STA located in the wide tree-lined avenues of the former French concession. Similarly, Chen Zhen’s installation work *Jue Chang*, as discussed earlier in this chapter, invites visitors to hit the drums to emancipate themselves from inner emotions and transform from their previous condition into a healing, calm, and peaceful state.⁸³⁰

⁸²⁷ Alexandra Munroe, “Early Works,” in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*, p. 81.

⁸²⁸ Cai Guo-Qiang, “Talk Talk What About The Art” in *What About the Art*, ed. Cai Guo-Qiang (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2016), pp.12-16. I would argue that the artists affiliated with the STA have similar conceptual understandings of art methodology.

⁸²⁹ Chen Liang (乘凉) has been a custom in China during the hot summer season especially in the evening. When the sun goes down and the temperature drops with the cool breeze, people bring their chairs or small tables or even small folding beds outside their houses and stay out till late at night. It is also a time to socialise with your neighbourhood or community. I visited Cai’s exhibition in Yokohama in 2001 and observed the connection with personal memories of China.

⁸³⁰ Chen Zhen, “Conversation between Daniel Buren and Chen Zhen,” in *In Praise of Black Magic*, (Turin: Hopefmonster, 2000), pp.119-13; Zhang Qing, “Transcendence,” A Foreword for Chen Zhen’s Art Exhibition; Wang Minan 汪民安, “社会疾病和希望 [Social Diseases and Hope],” *Chen Zhen* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, [Shanghai Bookstore Press], 2006).

Here, we have two artists, who both studied at the same institution and in the same department at roughly the same period. Their processes of extending their skills through academic training in stage art design at the STA exemplify the commonalities of applying strong artistic abilities in dealing with materials and space to express their own ideas in distinctive artworks that engage audiences. These experiments also enabled them to go beyond the traditional mediums such as oil paint, brush and canvas to explore new mediums or materials, and to conceptualise projects whether in a defined or open space. Cai has publicly acknowledged the importance of his study at STA:

I can say that I was educated by good modern artists at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. At that time, Art Academies in China was [sic] basically studying drawings and oil paintings. Everybody knows that an artist like me who makes installation and performance must first understand floor plans and architecture plans. The students of the general art academies did not understand the measurement marks on floor plans. The next step was to understand the use of materials and space. The following step was to know how to make budgets and make a budget in advance. An exhibition must be funded and [an artist should know] how much money it needs. A lot of attention must to be given to the audience's participation, effect, and mood changes from the audience who enter the theatre throughout the performance process. Because the theatre provides an audience-oriented and interactive relationship with the audience, as well as the spirit of team-cooperation. [...]

[...] So I feel that I have had in this period a very good education.⁸³¹

My discussion of Cai's early life that follows is drawn from a number of key sources including interviews given by the artist which have been cited previously.⁸³² Many recent interviews and the artist's own statements have emphasised the importance of Cai's hometown of Quanzhou 泉州 with its rich local culture as one of the original sources of his

⁸³¹ Cai Guoqiang, Shanghai Art Museum Art Lecture: Cai Guoqiang Talk about Art, Level 4 Lecture Theatre, Shanghai Art Museum, 03 February 2001. Original Chinese text for the quotation: "[...] 可以说我在上海戏剧学院受过比较好的现代艺术家的教育。当时中国的美术学院基本上就是学素描、油画创作。大家都知道,像我这样做装置艺术,行为艺术,艺术家来说,首先要懂得平面图,建筑图。一般的美术学院的学生他不懂平面图标尺寸,接下来是懂得材料的使用,空间的利用,再下来就是懂得造预算,一个展览必须要经费,需要多少钱,他能够提前做这个预算,还有很注意观众的参与,观众的效果,观众进入这个剧场,到整个演出过程中观众的情绪变化,因为戏剧是一种面对观众,与观众发生互动关系的,还有集体合作的精神。[...] 所以我感到,我在这个时代受的教育很好。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁸³² Those key resources are: Fei Dawei, "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing"; David Elliott, "Between Heaven and Earth: Space and Time in The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang"; Yang Zhao and Li Wei-Qing, *Cai Guo-Qiang: Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe* (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010); Kuiyi Shen, "Fengshui, qi, and the art of Cai Guo-Qiang," *Cai Guo-Qiang: ladder to the sky* Cai, Guoqiang et al., eds. Jeffrey Deitch, Rebecca Morse, (Los Angeles: Del Monico Books-Prestel, 2012).

artistic creativity. Quanzhou is a coastal city in Fujian Province 福建省 with an ancient history. It has a close relationship with Taiwan and Hong Kong with access to art information even throughout the difficult years of political turmoil during the Cultural Revolution. Cai's childhood and youth in this particular environment also included encounters with native cultural elements of mysticism and Chinese cosmology. Those cultural experiences together with his subsequent understanding of Daoism and Fengshui theory became important to constructing his artistic language. Cai had grown up in an intellectual family. His father was a traditional Chinese calligrapher and painter. Their home was often favoured by writers and artists especially during the Cultural Revolution period. He was exposed to the local culture at a young age. Cai chose to learn the Western art practice of drawing and watercolour instead of traditional Chinese painting, initially perhaps as a way of rebelling as he himself has suggested against a tradition which belonged to his father and his father's friends. In elementary and middle schools, Cai actively participated in cultural and performance groups. He learned to play the violin and had a great interest in Chinese martial arts and acted in a martial arts film. He joined the Quanzhou City Performance Art Group/Company after he finished school and started to learn drawing and painting under the company designer Chen Yitin 陈逸亭 and the local artist Yang Zhenrong 杨振荣. His wide interests in many fields and his life experiences in Quanzhou, as Cai described them, formed "a natural course to follow" for him to study at the STA in pursuing a path that was "free, having fewer restrictions, and [to] try everything" in art.⁸³³ Cai's memory of his childhood is strong and deep. Keeping the mode of "childishness" (童心) in his art has been one of critical elements in its making.⁸³⁴ For example, in the exhibition *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Am the Y2K Bug* at the Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna in 1999, alongside Cai's two gunpowder explosion projects, the installation work *Spring Breeze* allowed audiences to fly kites inside the exhibition hall. An artificial green hill was built indoors, almost like a theatre stage, with ten large industrial fans hidden underneath to generate wind. Audiences of all ages participated by flying the kites provided.⁸³⁵

Cai's educational experience at the STA, under as he put it "good modern artists," followed from his interest in modern art in his hometown.⁸³⁶ Quanzhou has historically been an important trade port since the Yuan Dynasty and in modern times has become known as

⁸³³ Fei Dawei, "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing," p.123.

⁸³⁴ Yang Zhao, "Look! That Sophisticated Boy: Cai Guo-Qiang and His Art," pp.264-267. In Yao Zhao's article, he used "男孩特色" (boyishness) to describe this particular element in Cai's art. In this thesis, I use "childishness" (童心) instead to reflect the appreciations from wide audiences.

⁸³⁵ I participated in Cai's exhibition opening in Vienna and revisited the exhibition several times.

⁸³⁶ Cai Guoqiang, Shanghai Art Museum Art Lecture: Cai Guoqiang Talk about Art, Level 4 Lecture Theatre, Shanghai Art Museum, 03 February 2001.

one of the centres of modern art in China.⁸³⁷ The access to information on modernism in art from an art magazine *Meishujia* 美术家 [Artists], published in Hong Kong in the late 1970s, provided, Cai has said, an “indirect inspiration” to him especially with its revelation of the concept of freedom of spirit as “art allows you to do anything and everything.”⁸³⁸ As discussed earlier, the realisation he arrived at during his study at the STA was that the difference between himself and artists in the West stemmed from divergent socio-political and cultural environments. To put Cai’s realisation in the context of the avant-garde movement at the time, in an interview Fei Dawei commented: “These avant-garde artists had a main goal of defying all forms of authority. To achieve this programme, they took Western contemporary art as a reference. But when this art began to become an authority in itself, they criticised it and tried to free themselves from it.”⁸³⁹ In Cai’s case, instead of studying Western philosophical art theory, he travelled in China in search of an individual artistic language. In his words, “to react against Western art because my cultural background was different from that of Western artists” and “to find a way of doing things differently.”⁸⁴⁰ My research has also illustrated how Cai and other artists in Shanghai discussed in this thesis were influenced but did not blindly follow Western modern and contemporary art. This reaction toward Western contemporary art influence appeared in Shanghai in the end of 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s with a small number of avant-garde artists searching for philosophical and cultural references outside of Western culture and theory and a return to traditional Chinese philosophy and culture. Such a reaction and process presented a pattern in reading, absorbing, and travelling to historic cultural sites in China, which can be traced in the lives of avant-garde artists in Shanghai in the early 1980s, for example with Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, and Chen Zhen who all also had STA affiliations.

Shanghai, where Cai lived in the first half of the 1980s, played a critical role, as I have suggested earlier in this chapter, in forming his individualist thinking on the relationship between art and culture. The relationship with Chinese traditional culture he reflects in the book *What About the Art* where he comments, “individuality found support in sources like the *I Ching* (*Yijing*).”⁸⁴¹ Furthermore, his study at the STA informed him on performance art stating “Chinese theater has methods of performance, and a background methodology, that are distinct from those of the West, constituting a unique concept of performance.”⁸⁴² The

⁸³⁷ See Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp.42-51.

⁸³⁸ Fei Dawei, “To Dare to Accomplish Nothing. Fei Dawei Interviews Cai Guo-Qiang.”

⁸³⁹ *ibid.*, p.123.

⁸⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp.123-124.

⁸⁴¹ Cai Guo-Qiang, “Talk Talk What About The Art” in *What About the Art*, ed. Cai Guo-Qiang (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2016), p.13.

⁸⁴² *ibid.*

relationship between art production and Chinese culture is thus an important reference in understanding Cai's "methodology" in his art practice.⁸⁴³ This is evidenced throughout his later works and echoes Chen Zhen's call for the elevation of "individual consciousness" as discussed earlier in this chapter.⁸⁴⁴

Cai's stance on individualism was reflected in his actions in the 1980s. During the avant-garde movement in the early 1980s and the much-promoted '85 Movement in the mid-1980s, Cai worked as a "loner" outside of any art movement.⁸⁴⁵ His position was no different from that of many other Shanghai avant-garde artists, such as Zhang Jianjun and Chen Zhen, who also resisted the collective spirit of the art movements at the time. That is not to say, however, that he was not influenced by what was happening in the Chinese art world. For example, in a very short period from his graduation from STA in 1985 to his move to Japan in 1986, he co-organised an exhibition between the Fuzhou City Yushan Art Museum near his home town and the Shanghai Art Museum, the *Shanghai - Fujian Youth Modern Art Joint Exhibition*, and participated in his first group exhibition in 1985. The exhibition showed the works of 16 artists including Huang Yongping from Fuzhou and Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen and Yu Xiaofu from Shanghai who were graduates of the STA. In this exhibition, he showed his works with gunpowder and oil on canvas for the first time in a public art museum together with another two oil paintings.⁸⁴⁶ (Figures 112, 113, 114.) Cai did not participate in the 1989



Figure 113. Cai Guoqiang, *Untitled No.2*, 1985.
Oil on canvas.



Figure 112. Cai Guoqiang, *Untitled No.1*, 1985.
Oil on canvas.

⁸⁴³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴⁴ Chen Zhen, "Individual Consciousness and Group Consciousness," pp.32-33.

⁸⁴⁵ Cai Guoqiang, Shanghai Art Museum Art Lecture: Cai Guoqiang Talk about Art, Level 4 Lecture Theatre, Shanghai Art Museum, 03 February 2001.

⁸⁴⁶ Gao Minglu, '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources Vol.2, pp.296-301.



Figure 114. Cai Guoqiang, *Self-Portrait: A Subjugated Soul*, 1985/89.
Gunpowder and oil on canvas, 167 x 118.

China Avant-garde exhibition in Beijing. Instead, he went to visit the exhibition from Japan where he was then based and gave a talk on Japanese contemporary art at the China Academy of Fine Art in Beijing.

His views on individualism in the 1980s, as I have argued earlier, were stated explicitly in *Talk Talk What About The Art?*, which confirms that his individualistic pursuits have been consistent from this critical period of his artistic career.⁸⁴⁷ There is no more accurate description of Cai's stance on this subject than that from himself:

While in China, I was not favored by either side. I was not interested in mainstream art, which let itself be used in the service of politics. Neither did I fervently participate in the avant-garde art movement to rebel against the system. Both groups were the same, demanding art to be a tool for social reform. When you observe my move from Quanzhou to Shanghai to Japan, a commonality develops. These were spaces, relatively speaking, that emphasize formality and methodology, providing a source of individualism for me, where I could do the things that pleased me, that allowed me to indulge in my individuality.⁸⁴⁸

Gu Wenda

Modern art production in China stands on two legs: one is traditional Chinese painting and the techniques of ink on rice paper or silk; and the other is Western art techniques and

⁸⁴⁷ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Talk Talk What About The Art," pp.14-35.

⁸⁴⁸ Yang Zhao, "Look! That Sophisticated Boy: Cai Guo-Qiang and His Art," pp.274-275.

mediums developed since the Renaissance in drawing, painting, sculpture, and printmaking. This distinction has been established in the art education system in China since the early twentieth century. Under this definition, Gu Wenda is at odds with the majority of Chinese avant-garde artists from the early part of the 1980s who were trained in Western art techniques as he was trained in traditional Chinese ink painting. Such a situation puts Gu in a unique position in the spectrum of experimental art in the early 1980s. He produced a large body of works in the 1980s and since then has become a prominent international artist in the contemporary art field.

As with many of his contemporary avant-garde artists in Shanghai the process of transferring new knowledge and thinking into their art practices has also been reflected in Gu's artistic career since the 1980s. Many commentators have, in recent years, published on Gu's art and this has provoked debates regarding his radical conceptual art practices. This section focuses on the most important writings on Gu's early art practice before he moved overseas in 1987 including: Fei Dawei's interview with the artist in 1986 published in the Chinese art magazine *Meishu*,⁸⁴⁹ Fan Jingzhong's (范景中) article "Silence and Transcendence: Thoughts on Gu Wenda's Works" published in the same edition of that publication,⁸⁵⁰ and the book by Gao Minglu (et al.) published in 1991 titled "China Contemporary Art History 1985-1986."⁸⁵¹ Among the large quantity of published documents on Gu's art over the last thirty plus years, these three early studies illustrate the formative period of Gu's art and the development of his ideas and art practice in his early artistic career in the 1980s. I also conducted an interview with Gu where he added more crucial detail of his thinking and influences, and which is a key source of reference for the argument I will advance that his background in Shanghai played a significant role in the construction of Gu's radical and independent conceptual art practice.⁸⁵²

⁸⁴⁹ Fei Dawei, "向现代派挑战" ["Challenging Modernism"], in *Meishu [Art]* 223, no.7 (1986): 53-56, 63. (In Chinese) For an English translation version of this interview see Fei Dawei, "Challenging Modernism – An Interview with Wenda Gu (1986)" in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung, trans. Jiayun Zhuang (New York: MoMA, 2010), pp.106-111, 107.

⁸⁵⁰ Fan Jingzhong, "Silence and Transcendence: Thoughts on Gu Wenda's Works," [沉默和超越：看谷文达作品的一些感想], *Meishu [Art]* 223, no.7 (1986). English title translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁸⁵¹ Gao Minglu, et al., *China Contemporary Art History 1985-1986* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1991). The second edition published in 2008 included some selected historical materials and became two volumes. The book title changed into "*The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*" as the first volume, and "*The '85 Movement: An anthology of Historical Sources*" as the second volume. (See Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*; Gao Minglu, ed., *The '85 Movement: An anthology of Historical Sources*.)

⁸⁵² Gu Wenda, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 31 July 2016).

In tracing Gu's trajectory as an artist, I will examine his critical years (1979 -1987) both as an art student and later as a teacher at the then Zhejiang Fine Art Academy (CAA) in Hangzhou, a major city close to Shanghai, before he moved overseas.⁸⁵³ The importance of the relationship between Shanghai and the CAA in the history of Chinese modern art has been discussed in Chapter 1. In this chapter, Gu's experience at the CAA will be closely analysed in the context of the link to his birthplace in Shanghai. While some artists from CAA were forming art groups towards the mid-1980s, Gu during the 1980s remained alone to pursue the development of his own artistic language at CAA.⁸⁵⁴ In my interview with the artist, Gu attributed his behaviour at CAA during the 1980s to an "individualistic personality" (自我独立的性格) linked to his Shanghai identity and deeply influenced by the city's modern history, his family background and education.⁸⁵⁵ As the Shanghai background is the focal point for my discussion of Gu Wenda's art oeuvre, it is necessary to look into his formative years in Shanghai where cultural and social influences planted the early seeds that later became unique characteristics in his thinking and art practice.

Gu's family background is an example of how local Shanghai cultural history is reflected in an individual's personal life. Gu is from a cultured family. His sister a musician and his brother an artist. His grandfather Gu Jianchen 谷剑尘 was a pioneer in modern theatre and film and part of the first generation who were involved in the modern theatre and film industry in Shanghai in the early twentieth century. He was an actor, director, and scriptwriter who later concentrated his efforts on education and research. His pioneering work on the four episodes of the drama script *Lonely Army* 孤军 (1923) was the first drama script with dialogue created in China.⁸⁵⁶ Some of the key players in that industry were members of The Leftist Writers Alliance, an organisation supported by the Chinese Communist Party. In keeping with the spirit of individualism that I have argued characterised

⁸⁵³ The China Academy of Art (CAA) was known as the Zhejiang Fine Art Academy when Gu Wenda was a student and teacher. For consistency throughout the thesis I will use the current name China Academy of Art (CAA) unless it is referred to by another name in a direct quote.

⁸⁵⁴ For example, six artists of CAA graduates Zhang Peili 张培力, Gen Jianyi 耿建翌, Song Lin 宋陵, Bao Jianfei 包剑斐, Wang Qiang 王强, Guan Yin 关颖 formed the artists' group named *Chishe* 池社 in Hangzhou in April 1986. See further information about this artists' group in Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.190-204.

⁸⁵⁵ Gu Wenda, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 31 July 2016).

⁸⁵⁶ Under the influences of Japanese and European modern drama in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the early drama/stage play emerged in Shanghai called "Xinju 新剧" [New Drama] with no written drama scripts for actors. The director for the play would give a main story line and allocated the roles of characters to each actor. The actors performed spontaneously to create their own dialogues according to how the drama developed. This style of performance style was called "Mubiao zhi 幕表制." (See in The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic China website at <www.mct.gov.cn/ggfw/whzyzg/ys/hj/201111/t20111121_512369.htm>, viewed 21 May 2018.

Shanghai, Gu's grandfather was independent from any political parties.⁸⁵⁷ After 1949, he was silenced because his independent political stance and criticism of the Party. He worked at STA in the 1950s and was imprisoned during the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He died just before the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. Gu recalled in my interview with him that his grandfather had organised a group of young children the same age as Gu to learn *Tang* dynasty poems during those difficult years of the Cultural Revolution when learning traditional culture and literature was prohibited.⁸⁵⁸ There is no doubt that the influential figure of his grandfather left an important cultural legacy not only to the family members, but also in the modern theatre history in China as well as to the art institution such as STA. Growing up in such a family environment, it is perhaps inevitable that the spirit of individualism would permeate Gu's life from very early on.

Gu's interest in art started with his older brother's help in very basic techniques. He followed his own interests to "scribble and draw for fun," later learning "artistic calligraphy and also painted a little bit" during his time at elementary and middle schools.⁸⁵⁹ His natural talent led him to become head of a propaganda unit within the School's Red Guards. He met his first art teacher, who was a painter of the modern school of Chinese ink landscape and started to learn Chinese landscape ink painting under this teacher in high school. Not until Gu entered the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College in 1973, however, did he receive formal art training.⁸⁶⁰ He was then assigned to study at the Woodcarving Department. In the 1970s and 1980s, the College quite often assigned new students to specialised departments without allowing them any choice or preference. Given his lack of interest in woodcarving and his dream to be an artist, Gu refused to follow the College's curriculum during his study and continued to pursue his interest in learning Chinese traditional landscape painting, his favourite style being that of a renowned modern Chinese painter Li Keran (李可染, 1907-1989).⁸⁶¹

Studying at the CAA was the turning point in Gu's artistic career. After graduating from the Shanghai Arts and Crafts College in 1976 and then having worked in a wood-carving factory as a designer for three years, he was accepted for a two-year postgraduate course in traditional Chinese painting at the China Academy of Art, in Hangzhou in 1979. His choice to

⁸⁵⁷ Gu Wenda, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 31 July 2016).

⁸⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁵⁹ Fei Dawei, "向现代派挑战" ["Challenging Modernism"], *Meishu [Art]* 223, no.7 (1986): 53-56, 63.

⁸⁶⁰ The Shanghai Arts and Crafts College was established in 1960. During the Cultural Revolution period, it was closed in May 1972 and reopened and changed location in October 1973. Other artists such as Chen Zhen and Fei Dawei were in the same cohort, Ding Yi and others entered the same college later in different time periods.

⁸⁶¹ Jane DeBevoise, Interview with Gu Wenda, (New York), Asia Art Archive, 2009, <www.China1980s.org>, viewed 10 August 2015.

study at this famous academy was not only because it was one of the best institutions for learning Chinese ink painting but also because it was a deliberate choice on his part to get away from Shanghai. Gu had come to find that some aspects of local culture, especially those influenced by commercial business, did not suit his personality.⁸⁶² His rebellious character led him to look for ideas or inspirations that provided more profound and intense ideas or inspirations. The Academy and Hangzhou provided him, as he has said, with an opportunity to get out of his “comfort zone.”⁸⁶³ He had a reputation for being controversial during his two years as a student by not following the academic requirements and afterwards as a faculty member in researching new directions in his art. The course he entered was an elite class with a small number of students in a traditional apprenticeship of “following the master to learn the trade” rather than an open class.⁸⁶⁴ His teacher, Professor Lu Yanshao 陆严少 was a well-respected master painter and commanded excellent skills in traditional Chinese landscape ink painting and calligraphy, as well as traditional Chinese art theory. Gu has said that after he enrolled in the academy, his understanding of art and the methods of art practice drastically changed as a consequence of his reading Western and Chinese philosophies, aesthetics, and religion.⁸⁶⁵ Instead of following the master to study traditional Chinese art, Gu pursued an independent course.⁸⁶⁶ The academy had a relatively large collection of Western modern art books and journals in comparison with other institutions in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Academy’s own publication *Meishu Yicong* 美术译丛 (*Translations of Work on Art*) was one of the few art publications that introduced Western art theories, genres or ideas during this period. Gu believed that “if you wanted to be an excellent graduate student, you had to be good at theory, not just practice and painting.”⁸⁶⁷ He read books from various sources “extensively and yet without seeking to understand things thoroughly.”⁸⁶⁸ The most influential Western thinkers on his ideas he has said were Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Freud.⁸⁶⁹ He spent most of his time in reading rather than making art, except to comply with the academic compulsory subjects such as copying paintings of ancient masters.⁸⁷⁰ The ramifications of this intellectual process resulted in his later taking a radical approach towards traditional Chinese ink painting in his practice.

⁸⁶² Fei Dawei, “Challenging Modernism – An Interview with Wenda Gu,” in *Meishu* 223.7 (1986): 53-56, 63.

⁸⁶³ Jane DeBevoise, Interview with Gu Wenda, (New York), Asia Art Archive, 2009, <www.China1980s.org>, viewed 10 August 2015.

⁸⁶⁴ Gu Wenda, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 31 July 2016).

⁸⁶⁵ Fei Dawei, “Challenging Modernism – An Interview with Gu Wenda,” p.107-108.

⁸⁶⁶ Jane DeBevoise, Interview with Gu Wenda, (New York), Asia Art Archive, 2009.

⁸⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁶⁹ Fei Dawei, “Challenging Modernism – An Interview with Gu Wenda,” pp.107-108.

⁸⁷⁰ *ibid.*

From 1981 to 1983, Gu produced oil paintings and ink on rice paper paintings basically in the Western style, as he intended to use “Western contemporary art as a reference point to impact Chinese painting.”⁸⁷¹ This period of oil paintings showed mostly in exploration of modernist styles with the influences of surrealism for example *Zoo* (1983) (动物园) (Figure 115.), *Three Goddesses* (三女神), *Café* (咖啡馆), *Insomnia People* (失眠人); and the subjects relating to humanity and “cosmic religious feeling” were represented in works such as *Religion and Science* (1982) (宗教与科学),⁸⁷² *Human Civilization* (人类文明), *Self-Portraits with Windows* (1984) (带窗口的自画像) (Figure 116), and *Two Body Portraits* (1985) (两个作为躯干的肖像), which have been discussed in depth in both Gao Minglu and his co-authors’s early writings and later in Zhou Yan’s publication *Odyssey of Culture: Wenda Gu and His Art* (2015).⁸⁷³ A critical period for Gu in his exploration of artistic expression was



Figure 115. Gu Wenda, *Zoo*, 1983. Oil on canvas.



Figure 116. Gu Wenda, *Self-Portraits with Windows*, 《带窗口的自画像》, 1984. Oil on canvas.

⁸⁷¹ *ibid*, p.108.

⁸⁷² See Fan Jingzhong, “Silence and Transcendence: Thoughts on Gu Wenda’s Works,” *Meishu [Art]* 223, no.7 (1986), pp46-52.

⁸⁷³ See Gao Minglu, et al., *’85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, p235-242; Zhou Yan, *Odyssey of Culture: Wenda Gu and His Art* (Berlin: Springer, 2015). Zhou Yan was one of the co-authors with Gao Minglu for the publication *The ’85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*. Yan Zhou has taught at Kenyon College (Ohio) since 2006. He teaches courses on Asian art history with an emphasis on modern and contemporary Chinese art. His research focuses on Chinese contemporary art in the context of globalization and post-colonialism.

from 1984 to 1986, when he found direction through language or texts to create conceptual meanings. This became a foundation for Gu's artistic expression and was later expanded to incorporate material substances in his practice. The choice of using the culturally contrasting materials of ink on Chinese rice paper and oil paint was part of Gu's conception of the primary importance of materials and medium in art practice. In his own words, the artist explained the significance of materials and medium for him:

I used to think it was important to grasp the material and medium of Chinese painting because they are so exceptional. No one had been able to completely infiltrate modernism through the medium. Materials can influence (artistic) concepts and substance. There is neither a hierarchy nor separation between form and content.⁸⁷⁴

This concept continued to inform his artistic language and strategies after he moved to the United States in 1987. Gu's artistic expressions expanded from language or text (a series of works he began in the mid 1980s in Shanghai that I discuss in more detail below) to material substances in his practices and produced a body of works significant in the international art context. Focusing on the human body "as the centre of the universe — the most essential material" — he attempted to explore a new type of language that linked the human body with art history, which was brought to the forefront of public attention by new discoveries in biological science and genetic research at the time. He believes, he has said, that "when the human body is represented, art becomes subjective."⁸⁷⁵ Oblivious to cultural and social differences and the sensitivities of the social environment at the time, Gu presented the controversial series of installation works *Oedipus Refound*, first shown in San Francisco in 1989. The installation included menstrual blood from used tampons which he collected from volunteers together with their statements. The artist did not anticipate the reaction of the US public where the installation of menstrual blood touched upon a range of issues such as feminism, religion, power, and gender. It caused a public outcry and attracted strong criticisms from art critics against what was seen as one of the most controversial art practices in the international art arena of the time.⁸⁷⁶ In contrast to the menstrual blood series, his on-going large installation series *United Nations*, also starting from 1989 and consisting of words made from human hair collected from a large number of individuals all over the world, has been widely exhibited in many countries with international success. The United Nations series addressed the issues of world communications and cultural inclusion,

⁸⁷⁴ Fei Dawei, "Challenging Modernism – An Interview with Gu Wenda," p.108.

⁸⁷⁵ Melissa Chu, "The Crisis of Calligraphy and New Way of Tea: An interview with Wenda Gu," 4 January 2002 New York. <<http://wendagu.com/home.html>>, viewed 09 October 2015.

⁸⁷⁶ David Cateforis, "An interview with Wenda Gu by David Cateforis" (an edited transcript of an interview conducted in the artist's Brooklyn home) on 16 August, 2002. <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/pg_10?206532661371066:NO:10:P10_ETD_SUBID:63849>, viewed 08 April 2015.

with the effect that it has thrown a positive light on Gu's artistic pursuit in using human biological materials in his artistic creations. By using materials from the human body to challenge the status quo culturally and socially, Gu has consistently demonstrated his rebellious mentality and continuous interest in material substance in art practice.

In 1985 while still in China, Gu had undergone another conceptual shift as he found himself moving in the same direction as many young artists in the contemporary art scene in China. As this movement (known as Art New Wave or '85 Movement and discussed earlier in this thesis) gained momentum, his rebellious personality led him in a different direction. Dissatisfied with the idea of using "western contemporary art as a reference point to impact Chinese painting," he turned to Chinese traditional art forms and wanted, as he has said, for the reference system in his art to be much wider "to encompass the entire world."⁸⁷⁷ During that period, he was also interested in seal carving and studied the school of Chinese characters for the seal script of Zhuan Zi 篆字. At the same time, he was reading the debates of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein on linguistic theory.⁸⁷⁸ He started to use deconstructed Chinese characters — a symbol of traditional culture — and regrouping the compounds into new characters which could not be found in the dictionary. He created those new characters in a calligraphic style together with ink abstract background painting, such as the ink painting *Contemplation* (《畅神》, 1985), as part of what was also known as the *Pseudo-Characters Series*. (Figure 117.) Aesthetically, he was looking for a change of conventional visual reception from an image as a whole to a combined image and text



Figure 117. Gu Wenda, *Contemplation* 《畅神》, 1985. Ink on rice paper.

⁸⁷⁷ Fei Dawei, "Challenging Modernism— An Interview with Gu Wenda," p.108.

⁸⁷⁸ See Gu Wenda, "非陈述的文字" [Non-Stated Text], *Zhongguo Meishubao* 6. [*Fine Arts in China* newspaper] (1986): pp.32-36

reading with an element of absurdity or ambiguity in order to reinterpret visual languages. Gu explained as follows:

I deconstructed and synthesized Chinese characters, because to me, character can be seen as a new form of representation. When abstract painting is combined with character, the result is abstract in form, and yet, the characters still possess specific content. As a result, the pictorial content based on this combination is conveyed not through natural images but through language, thus transforming the conventional ways of representation.⁸⁷⁹

This combination of abstract painting with Chinese characters was unique in the Chinese contemporary art field in the 1980s. It bore a conceptual element yet the medium, technique, and visual appearance adhered very much to traditional Chinese ink painting. Two exhibitions in 1985 and 1986 brought Gu's *Pseudo-Characters* series into the public eye in China. The exhibitions ran in parallel with a heated debate on traditional Chinese ink painting in the discourse caused by an article by Li Xiaoshan 李小山 titled "My View on the Contemporary Chinese [ink] Paintings" (当代中国画之我见) "Chinese Painting Has Reached the Dead End" ("中国画已到了穷途末日的时候"), published by *Jiangsu Pictorial* (江苏画刊) art magazine in 1985.⁸⁸⁰ The 1985 exhibition was called *Invitational Exhibition on New Works of Chinese Painting* (《国画新作邀请展》) at the Wuhan Exhibition Hall (武汉展览馆) in the city of Wuhan 武汉.⁸⁸¹ In this exhibition, Gu showed for the first time his early art using the fake characters that he had created. Subsequently, Gu was invited to show his recent work at the Xi'an Artist Gallery in Xian 西安 in conjunction with a national symposium organised by the China National Art Research Academy (中国艺术研究院) and the Shan'xi Artists Association (陕西美术家协会).⁸⁸² (Figure 118.) The exhibition occupied two spaces:

⁸⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.109.

⁸⁸⁰ Li Xiaoshan graduated from the Nanjing Fine Art Academy with a Master's degree in traditional Chinese landscape paintings in 1984. The editorial team led by Liu Dianzhang, Suo Fei, and Cheng Dali invited Li to publish his article. The content of Li's article was in two parts, one part articulating the characteristic of traditional Chinese [ink] art and the challenges of new ideas or demand of new directions it faced in the 1980s, and another providing the critiques to the works of some prominent traditional Chinese art artists of the time. In my view, the spirit in Li's writing reflects the avant-garde art movement of the 1980s that challenged the art establishment in China, regardless of the subjects raised in the article. It was a significant debate in contemporary Chinese art history especially on traditional Chinese art. Due to the scope of this thesis and the large volume of writings on the subject in China, see a concise summary with details of this debate in Gao Minglu, et al., *'85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, pp.126-149.

⁸⁸¹ It was organised by an artist and bureaucrat Zhou Shaohua 周绍华, and the art critics Pen De 彭德 and Pi Daojian 皮道坚 in Wuhan 武汉, Hubei 湖北 province. See details in Lu Hong's (鲁虹) article "85 Retrospect Five Chapters" [八五往事回顾五则] at <<http://www.vccoo.com/v/7c9a57>>.

⁸⁸² Jane DeBevoise, Interview with Gu Wenda, (New York), Asia Art Archive, 2009.



Figure 118. Gu Wenda, *Wisdom Comes From Tranquillity* 《静则生灵》, 1986.
A mixed media ink and woven installation, 500 x 800 x 80 cm.

an upstairs space for Gu's traditional landscape ink paintings as a pretext for displaying his works, and a large hall with high ceilings at the ground floor for displaying his current experimental works in large scroll installations with photographs and performances which Gu had prepared for the exhibition. Those works were strongly influenced by the form of the "Big Characters Poster" (大字报) from the Cultural Revolution.⁸⁸³ Following an inspection by local officials, however, the ground floor of the exhibition had to be closed. Later, it only opened to people who had official permission. At the same time, the major national art magazine *Meishu* 《美术》 published Fei Dawei's interview and Fan Jingzhong's article introducing Gu's experimental works for the first time, as well as having the work of another Shanghai vanguard artist, Zhang Jianjun, for the cover image.⁸⁸⁴

⁸⁸³ "Big-Character-Poster" is a form of political writing where posters with handwritten characters are pasted on public walls as a forum for public discussions. This form of public discussion developed during the political campaign of the "Hundred Flowers Movement" in the mid-1950s and used widely during the Cultural Revolution. This form has been appropriated by contemporary artists in China including Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan and Wang Guangyi etc.

⁸⁸⁴ *Meishu* [Fine Art] 223.7 (1986). In this edition, Fan Jingzhong's article titled "Silence and Transcendence: Some Reflections on Gu Wenda's Works" [沉默与超越 – 看谷文达作品的一些感想] focused on the period of Gu's mainly ink paintings with deconstructing the Chinese characters in traditional Chinese calligraphy between 1984 to 1985. This edition of *Meishu* included a number of Shanghai avant-garde artists as well as Zhang Jianjun's work on the cover. In spite of this inclusion of Shanghai artists, the main emphasis from the editor

Gu's writings during the early and mid-1980s form an integral part of his art productions. They clearly show, I suggest, the conceptual sources or inspirations from his philosophical research. The intensive reading he undertook during his two years of study at the Academy and his continuous interest in Western modern and Eastern traditional philosophies and art theories have provided the conceptual framework for Gu's new directions in art practice. In addition to the influences of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Freud on his thinking, he was inspired also by the linguistic and logic philosophies by Heidegger, Russell and Wittgenstein especially noting Wittgenstein's investigation theory on the philosophy of language.⁸⁸⁵ That theory was a starting point for the conceptual basis in his thinking in deconstructing Zi 字 (meaning: characters) and Shufa 书法 (meaning: calligraphy).⁸⁸⁶ His early writings between 1985 and 1986 such as "The 'Realm' of Art" (艺术的"境界"),⁸⁸⁷ "Art Notes" (艺术笔记)⁸⁸⁸ and "Non-States Text" (非陈述的文字)⁸⁸⁹ published in an art magazine and an art newspaper, reflected his intellectual process. In particular, the "Non-States Text" piece was written in an essay style but using the Chinese dictionary with homophones. The sentences are separated or sometime broken by punctuation marks which have been put in the wrong places or replaced by arrow symbols. Some English words for names of people and places have been put randomly in upper and lower cases with phonetically translated Chinese characters. Some Chinese characters are mixed with words in Pin Yin 拼音, a phonetical system to pronounce the characters in the Roman alphabet. The narratives are sometimes logical and at other times puzzling or confusing when homophones are used. The artist here challenges readers to change their normal reading habits from a literary level to a conceptual level to reinterpret the text. This approach runs in parallel with Gu's investigations in deconstructing or reassembling Chinese characters in his ink paintings. These researches into the interplay of literature and art so as to form an integrated visual language, I suggest, have a strong reference to the traditional Chinese Literati Art which also brought together literature and visual art.⁸⁹⁰ During the nineteenth

Gao Minglu of this edition was to promote the '85 Movement. The artworks discussed in this edition were mostly produced between 1984 and 1985 from selected artists.

⁸⁸⁵ Gu Wenda, "非陈述的文字" [Non-States Text], *Zhongguo Meishubao* 6. [*Fine Arts in China* newspaper] (1986): 32-36.

⁸⁸⁶ The difference between "characters" and "calligraphy" is best understood as characters are the composite script for written and printed Chinese language. Chinese calligraphy is the art form of writing Chinese characters with brush and ink.

⁸⁸⁷ Gu Wenda, "艺术的境界" [The 'Realm' of Art], 8-9. *Meishu sichao* (1985): 19-21.

⁸⁸⁸ Gu Wenda, "艺术笔记" [Art Notes], *Zhongguo Meishubao* 9. [*Fine Arts in China* newspaper] (1985): 3.

⁸⁸⁹ Gu Wenda, "非陈述的文字" [Non-States Text], *Zhongguo Meishubao* 6. [*Fine Arts in China* newspaper] (1986): 32-36.

⁸⁹⁰ According to the English online website Encyclopaedia Britannica: The literati painting or 文人画 first formulated in the Northern Song period (960–1127) is "the ideal form of the Chinese scholar-painter who was

century and early twentieth century the Shanghai School artists challenged this traditional art form by incorporating Western painting techniques into Chinese ink painting, thus breaking down the cultural and social hierarchies surrounding “scholar-painting” in China. This legacy was reflected in Gu’s interdisciplinary experimentations across different fields of the arts in the middle of the 1980s in challenging and questioning the basic language structures, literary and visual, and by deconstructing the cultural symbols of Chinese characters using perspectives from traditional Eastern and modern Western philosophies.

Another manuscript by Gu “He and His House” (1984-85) (他和他的屋子) appeared in the publication *’85 New Wave Archives* edited by Fei Dawei. It is a fictional story of an artist’s life in the same period,⁸⁹¹ written in the first person. The narrative flows seemingly freely, following the stream of the author’s thought. People who lived through the late 1970s and 1980s in China are familiar with the genre of “Yishiliu 意识流” (“stream of consciousness”), a popular concept in literature, theatre, and film that was introduced through foreign literature and films during the Cultural Fever period.⁸⁹² The early twentieth-century Western literary form of “stream of consciousness” and the Japanese modern literature genre “I-Novel” both influenced Chinese early modern literature during that period.⁸⁹³ The influences of these literary forms on films in the 1950s and 1960s in the West did not arrive in China until the 1980s. Gu’s manuscript reflected both of those literary styles. It is another example of Gu’s wide literary interests and his ability to absorb and experiment with different art forms and with a variety of ideas. In a conversation with the art critic Shi Jian on influences from Western art theories in the mid-1980s, Gu indicated that his approach in progressing his art was not restricted to any specific style or school. He wanted to be a “creative subject,” and therefore he said he must use other ideas and knowledge. He stated that his inspirations and influences “were often from other professional fields rather than from the

more interested in personal erudition and expression than in literal representation or an immediately attractive surface beauty.” (See Encyclopaedia Britannica online website at <<https://www.britannica.com/art/wenrenhua>>, viewed 21 May 2018.

⁸⁹¹ Gu Wenda, “他和他的屋子” [“He and His House”], *’85 New Wave Archives* Vol.I, ed. Fei Daiwei (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2007), pp.89-227.

⁸⁹² This popular trend often accompanies the reading of Freudian theory in the early 1980s period. See a concise introduction on the “stream of consciousness” as a narrative technique in Western literature at <<https://www.britannica.com/art/stream-of-consciousness>>, viewed 15 August 2015.

⁸⁹³ There have been studies produced in China since the 1980s on the influence of the Japanese I-Novel genre on Chinese modern literature. For example, see Guo Laishun (郭来舜), “郁达夫与日本的 ‘自我小说’ ” in 《外国文学研究》 [*Journal of Foreign Literature Studies*] 4 (1982): 79-83; Shi Yanling (史艳玲), Li Hongliang (李洪良), “日本的 ‘私小说’ 与中国现代文学” [Japanese “I-Novel” and Chinese Modern Literature] in 《长城》 [*Great Wall Journal*] 3X (2013): pp.6-7.

area of fine art.”⁸⁹⁴ From Gu’s writings, one can gain an appreciation of the artist’s ambitious attempt to transcend boundaries, to move from language, literature, theatre or film to visual art. This may be a reflection of the legacy of his grandfather, a modernist theatre and film master, and therefore also of a legacy of modernism from early twentieth-century Shanghai.

Gu emerged in the avant-garde scene in 1985 with his distinctive art practice influenced by the discipline of traditional Chinese ink art, an art practice that was recognised by art critics at the time as a special case associated with the ’85 Movement. This was despite the fact that others associated with the Movement were mostly from backgrounds from non-traditional Chinese ink art centres in China. Gu has also seen himself as a participant in the Movement from a position which is rather ambivalent. Throughout the 1980s and before moving abroad, Gu never joined any art groups but remained firmly committed to his own individualistic way of thinking. This position has been reiterated by the artist himself on many occasions, including in my formal interview with him in 2016.⁸⁹⁵ He has said that he saw his individualistic standpoint as part of his personality at the time and he noted it was deeply influenced by his family background and Shanghai’s modern history.⁸⁹⁶ Gu has been conscious from very early on of his individual position in the ’85 Movement art activities. This was evident from his statements in two critical interviews. In the early interview with Fei Dawei published in *Meishu* magazine at the peak of Art New Wave activities in 1986, Gu stated: “Besides, I had a strong rebellious mentality and I don't want to become part of the trend. I would escape [the movement] once it became a trend. Maybe this was a kind of ‘consciousness of counterculture’!”⁸⁹⁷ In a later interview by Shi Jian in 2007 Gu stated:

My participation in "85" was a very special case. [...] I think there were two reasons for this. One was that I was not interested in everyone gathering movements. This was where I positioned myself outside the group movement. [The] other one was probably

⁸⁹⁴ Gu’s original words in Chinese are: “对我来说，沿着一条线、一个学派走，这不是我的作风。我一定是为我所用，我自己想做一个创作主体。我很少从美术界受到启发，我受的影响基本都是从其它专业来的。” See “Interview Gu Wenda” by Shi Jian in *85’ New Wave Archives*, ed. Fei Dawei, Vol.I, p.24. English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁸⁹⁵ Gu Wenda, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 31 July 2016).

⁸⁹⁶ *ibid.* Also see Zhen Shengtian, Interview Gu Wenda at Gu’s Shanghai Studio, 12 October 2012. <fashion.163.com/16/0423/12/BLBAT7K200264MK3.html>, Viewed 20 May 2018.

⁸⁹⁷ Fei Dawei, “Challenging Modernism – An Interview with Gu Wenda,” p.108. Original Chinese text: “另外，我有一种强烈的叛逆心理，我不喜欢使自己成为潮流中的一员。潮流到了，我就要避开。也许算一种“反主流文化的意识”吧!” English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

the self-consciousness in my actions. I didn't want to be involved in a group or completely in the Movement.⁸⁹⁸

As this movement was evident largely in collective group efforts to break through political and social barriers and boundaries, Gu saw his participation in the movement as the act of an individual but realised that a combined force was potentially much stronger as a means to break through the political and social norms at the time.⁸⁹⁹ Although he lived in Hangzhou near Shanghai during the 1980s, his relationship with Shanghai avant-garde art activities was described in his own words: "Although I did not participate [in avant-garde art activities in Shanghai], in fact, [I] have always paid a close attention, the way of thinking has been on the inside, but my way of action is outside."⁹⁰⁰ This kind of behaviour can be described in Chinese as "默契" (tacit understanding) that reflects the characteristic of the avant-garde art circle in Shanghai from the 1980s in which the artists were connected privately and acted independently. Perhaps this individualistic culture of Shanghai is one of the reasons, after years of living in New York, that Gu has established a studio back in Shanghai for his art production since 1993, when many artists in China or from overseas went instead to join the booming art industry in Beijing at the time.⁹⁰¹

The three artists discussed in this chapter, Chen Zhen, Cai Guoqiang, and Gu Wenda, I have argued, exemplify the spirit of individualism in Shanghai in the 1980s as an intrinsic part of their artistic careers and have conveyed its significance in their art. They were part of the generation of artists who experienced the dynamic transitional period of social and political changes in China in the 1980s. Their individualistic and independent approaches were articulated through their participation in avant-garde art activities in the mid 1980s and in their experimental art practices, which were often radical at the time. As distinct from the emphasis found in writings by other scholars, published both internationally and in China, this chapter has focused on their early art careers and evaluated the significance of

⁸⁹⁸ See Fei Dawei, "Challenge Modernism: Interview of the artist Gu Wenda by Fei Dawei," in p.7. *Meishu [Fine Art]* (1986): pp.53-56, 63; Shi Jian, "Interview Gu Wenda" [谷文达访谈], in '85 *New Wave Archives*, Vol.I ed. Fei Dawei (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2007), pp.19, 31. Original Chinese text: "我参与'85'是非常特别的个案。[...]我想, 这里面有两个原因, 一个是我对这些大家及其起哄的潮流不感兴趣, 这是我置身于潮流之外; 另外一点可能就是我的自我行为意识, 我不想全部介入一个群体或者是一个整体的潮流。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁸⁹⁹ *ibid.* Also see in Jane DeBevoise, Interview with Gu Wenda, 2009.

⁹⁰⁰ Fei Dawei, "Challenging Modernism – An Interview with Gu Wenda (1986)," p.19. Original Chinese text: "我(虽然)没有介入, 其实一直在关注, 思维方式一直在里面, 但是我的行为方式是在这之外。" English translation by Lansheng Zhang and David Kelly.

⁹⁰¹ Gu Wenda, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 31 July 2016).

the circumstances of their lives in Shanghai and developments in their artistic careers in the 1980s. In exploring the significance of their Shanghai experiences, the chapter has highlighted differences between them and also the commonalities they shared including their intellectual family backgrounds, the cultural environment in Shanghai, and their art educations and training. In particular, they were influenced by concepts derived from their teachers who upheld the legacy of modernism from early twentieth-century Shanghai.

Their individual characteristics were examined through their distinctive artworks and the ideas they have expressed in describing their art. I have demonstrated how their time in Shanghai contributed to their intellectual evolution and to breakthrough experiments in their art practices to which all three saw philosophical study as vital. Western modern philosophers had a significant impact on their art but traditional Chinese philosophies became vital to their reflective thinking. One may argue every artist carries the stamp of his or her early training and beginnings. In this chapter my investigation has demonstrated that the early careers of these three artists displayed a distinctive spirit of individualism with strong connections to the early twentieth-century modern art history and to the cultural milieu of Shanghai in the 1980s. In essence these three individuals shared common attributes in their experimental art practices that established them as forerunners and catalysts in developments in contemporary Chinese art from the mid-1980s.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study has been to examine the evolution of avant-garde art in Shanghai which took place from the end of the 1970s and throughout the next decade. I argue that the developments in Shanghai were at times in advance of those elsewhere in China. I have investigated this subject in-depth in five case study chapters and identified the most significant characteristics of the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the 1980s with a focus on individual artists and art administrators. In my analysis I have demonstrated that the quality of individualism in Shanghai avant-garde art, together with the strong legacy of early twentieth-century modernism in Shanghai, were the essential features that defined the Shanghai avant-garde art scene in the context of changes in contemporary art in China, especially during the '85 New Wave art movement.⁹⁰² These factors empowered some avant-garde artists in Shanghai to act at the forefront of artistic experimentations in China at that time and for art administrators to make changes in public art museums in a repressive and often hostile, socio-political environment. The important achievements of Shanghai avant-garde artists and art administrators discussed in this thesis, I have argued, were crucial to the development of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s but have been neglected in the national and international discourse on contemporary Chinese art. This lack of in-depth study on Shanghai has resulted in inadequate representation of Shanghai's avant-garde art of the 1980s in the historiography of contemporary Chinese art.

The spirit of individualism in artistic production and the intellectual and artistic contributions of the artists discussed in the thesis have been viewed within the context of China's prevailing socio-political ethos of collectivism which remained in force in the late 1970s and 1980s, even during the "reform and opening-up" period. Individualism and its affiliation with liberalism and modernism have been a fundamental issue that has cut across political, social and cultural realms since Western modernist ideas were introduced into China in the late nineteenth century. Individualism, I argue, has been the key issue for artists and artistic production in China and has been contested in the art discourse and the political arena throughout Chinese modern history. It continues the battle for its full validation today. This thesis is intended to fill this gap in the narrative of China's contemporary art history.

⁹⁰² See the definition of "the spirit of Individualism" and the "legacy of early twentieth-century modernism" in the beginning of Introduction. Collectivism as part of the CCP ideology has been a dominant socialist cultural characteristic in China since 1949. This has been discussed in the context of China's contemporary art movement and discourse in the 1980s in Chapter 1.

While recognising that individualism and modernist art influences may exist elsewhere in China, I have demonstrated that these influences were stronger with a more distinctive existence in Shanghai's avant-garde art scene in the 1980s. In Chapter 1, the section on "National Discourse, Local Voice: Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1980s" is dedicated to elucidating the relationship between the Shanghai avant-garde art scene and national contemporary art developments and how Shanghai artists have been represented in the nation's art discourse. I highlight the spirit of individualism as the essence of avant-garde art in Shanghai, together with the powerful influence of early twentieth-century modernism, as representing a distinctive "local voice" in contrast to the collectivist tendencies elsewhere in China during this period.

This Shanghai "local voice" has been examined in the case study chapters through the art and art practice of individual artists and art administrators. The example of Yu Youhan's interaction with the Fan family and his enduring friendship with their son Fan Elun since their teenage years, illustrates how the city's strong modernist legacy helped cultivate Yu's artistic and cultural life.⁹⁰³ My research findings reflect the importance of individual teachers within Shanghai institutions in introducing the modernist legacy to a new generation of students.

I have outlined the case why the artistic explorations in the early 1980s of some leading avant-garde artists in Shanghai were pioneering in the context of contemporary art changes in China at the time. Two examples are Zhang Jianjun's experiments with mixed materials on canvas between 1981 to 1983 and Cai Guoqiang's experimentation with gunpowder in 1985. I have also explored the significance of elements of Eastern philosophic thinking in the work of a number of Shanghai artists and argued this is evidence that those artists were searching for artistic vocabularies that were not only derived from Western ideas, but rather that traditional Chinese culture was an important influence in the nascent avant-garde art scene in Shanghai in that period. I have also argued that art administrators from SAM played a leading role in building the modern art museum in China by engaging with contemporary art activities and introducing new curatorial practices into the museum's exhibitions that were unprecedented in China's state-owned art museums in the mid 1980s.

⁹⁰³ Leo Ou-Fan Lee once commented on the relationship of modern economy and urban culture and arts in Shanghai pre-1949: "[...] these aspects of urban modernity provided the cultural matrix in which a special set of literary and artistic sensibilities was nurtured." (See Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China*, p.82.) This description of earlier Shanghai cultural society and its legacy was later reflected in Yu Youhan's formative years during the late 1950s and first half of the 1960s.

In relation to Shanghai's historical and contemporary social and political complexities, I argued that instead of conducting public discourse which was strictly controlled by the government in the early 1980s, in fact a special type of art discourse developed in Shanghai that I defined as the "studio discourse." This was formed by a small network of avant-garde artists and writers who communicated with each other by private studio visits. During the 1980s these kinds of communication networks were informal but enabled a small circle of independently-minded artists to exchange ideas and information on art, critique each other's work and discuss art more broadly. Critical thinking and views expressed during such visits were not structured or constrained by the social and political norms.

The research in this thesis has been based on empirical evidence and my first-hand experiences as a practicing artist and my friendship with key artists and art administrators and writers in Shanghai during the 1980s, as well as the interviews undertaken over the years including during this academic study. From a large volume of literature and materials related to avant-garde art in China of that decade, I have taken an approach in referencing those early seminal writings published from the 1980s to 1990s as primary sources. This approach together with close examination of the artworks produced, the timing of their creation as well as of pivotal events such as exhibitions, was central to my methodology. This was critical to a contextual analysis and an adequate evaluation of avant-garde art in Shanghai of that period as I have articulated throughout the thesis.

This study overarches the disciplines of Art History and Museology. In this thesis, the Shanghai Art Museum and its role in the development of contemporary art in China in the 1980s has been examined in-depth for the first time. My enquiry explored the role of individuals who worked in the Museum and contributed to the significant transformation of SAM from a bureaucratic art institution to a modern art museum during this period. The investigation probed China's political and bureaucratic system within which art museums were structured and the environment in which art administrators worked within these institutions, often at odds with the official system. I have argued that individual art administrators acted with their own vision and beliefs, and were the critical agents in creating and shaping institutional changes and exerting their influence within the bureaucracy to engage with avant-garde art and artists during the transitional period of the 1980s. Their actions resonated with the spirit of individualism, the characteristic of the Shanghai avant-garde art scene that I have defended throughout the thesis. My examination demonstrated how SAM stood out among all other art museums in the country at the time in its institutional structural reform, its curatorial practice and exhibition programme, and its pragmatic approach to implement change. I argued, SAM played a leading role in building the modern art museum in China in the 1980s and was crucial for establishing the *Shanghai*

Biennale exhibition programme which has had a significant impact on public art museums in China in their engagement with contemporary art in the following decades. Thus, this thesis contributes to scholarship in the field of China's art museology

The research in this thesis has identified that the fundamental quality and the important achievements of Shanghai avant-garde artists and art administrators in the 1980s have been overlooked and are often displaced chronologically within the theoretical rhetoric of writers in the contemporary Chinese art discourse. This displacement, I contend, reflects the inadequate representation and evaluation of avant-garde art in Shanghai of the 1980s, and is an impediment to the better understanding of the development of contemporary Chinese art in general and to the historiography of this field specifically.

Appendix 1.

Artist Biographies

My research is based predominantly on interviews and primary sources, as well as secondary published sources which are cited in the relevant chapters in the body of the thesis. The following biographies provide chronological detail of key exhibitions and collections and web links to supplementary material on the artists.

Zhang Jianjun 张健君

1955 Born in Shanghai, China

Education

1978 Fine Arts Department, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai, China

Positions

1986-1989 Director of the Curatorial and Art Research Department, Shanghai Art Museum, China

1987-1989 Assistant Director, Shanghai Art Museum, China

1995-2002 Curatorial Advisor, Shanghai Art Museum, China

1996 Member, Artistic Advisory Committee, First Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai Art Museum, China

2000 Member, Artistic Advisory Committee, Third Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai Art Museum, China

Participant, International Curatorial Workshop, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

2005 Member, Artistic Advisory Committee, Sixth Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai Art Museum, China

1997-2010 Adjunct Professor, New York University, New York, USA

2007- Present Assistant Professor, New York University, Shanghai, China

Solo Exhibitions

2015 *Mountain & River*, Christian Duvernois Gallery, New York, New York, America
1980s: *Zhang Jian-Jun's Early Artwork (1978-1988)*, Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China

Nature and Beyond, Leo Gallery, Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
China Water · Ink · China, Pace Prints Gallery, New York, USA

2014 *Nature*, Art Projects International, New York, USA

2012 *Forms · Water · Vestiges*, Pavilion of Repose Garden, Kunshan, China

2011 *Water*, 99 Art Center, Shanghai, China

2007 *Alternative Landscape*, 140 sqm Gallery, Shanghai, China
Mirage Garden Part 6, South Beauty Garden, Shanghai, China (in collaboration with Barbara Edelstein)
Vestiges of a Process: New York, Shanghai, China / New Village, iPreciation Gallery, Singapore

2005 *Vestiges of a Process*, Asian American Art Centre, New York, America Garden of Wishing Trees, Maiden Lane Exhibition Space, New York, USA (in collaboration with Barbara Edelstein)

2004 *Vestiges of a Process: Chelsea Chapter*, DTW Gallery, New York, USA

2003 *Mountain & River*, Art Projects International Gallery, New York, USA

2002 *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation*, He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen, China
Vestiges of a Process: Guangzhou Chapter, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China
China Chapter, Museum of the Shenzhen Art Institute, Shenzhen, China

2001 Art Projects International, New York, USA

- 1997 *Footprint*, Gallerie Deux, Tokyo, Japan
- 1995 Art Projects International Gallery, New York, USA
- 1994 *The Paradox of the Fish*, Gallery Contempo, New York, USA, 1989
Nerlino Gallery, New York, USA
- 1988 *Existence*, Key Gallery, Illinois, USA
Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA, 1987 Shanghai Art Museum,
Shanghai, China

Group Exhibitions (selected)

- 2016 *Under Heaven: Contemporary Art from China in the Ahmanson Collection*,
Ahmanson Gallery, Irvine, California, USA
White Grey Black, Canvas International Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Water & Ink: Tradition in the Contemporary Art, China Cultural Center,
Brussels, Belgium
Wu-U Speech: Artists Living in Shanghai, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai,
China
Art Shenzhen 2016 Group Exhibition, Leo Gallery, Shenzhen, China
- 2015 *View from Shanghai*, Cloud Art Museum, Shanghai, China
30 Years of Contemporary Shanghai Art, Sheshan Contemporary Art Center,
Shanghai, China
Navigating Abstraction, Christian Duvernois Gallery, New York, New York,
USA *Open: Contemporary Ink Art*, Da Xiang Art Space, Taichung, Taiwan
Force 12 Hurricane: Ming Gathering, Ming Yuan Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 2014 *Nature and Beyond*, Leo Gallery, Shanghai, China
Pursuing Dream: Shanghai Sculpture Invitational Show, Shanghai Sculpture
Space, China
Contemporary Ink, Da Xiang Art Space, Taichung, Taiwan
Experimental Art, The 12th China National Art Exhibition, Today Museum,
Beijing, China
Sempre Natura, Christian Duvernois Gallery, New York, USA
Chinese Abstraction: 1980s-Current, Pearl Lam Galleries, Art Basel Hong Kong,
Hong Kong, China
China Arte Brazil, OCA, Sao Paulo, Brazil
Contemporary Chinese Prints, Pace Prints Gallery, New York, USA

Nomads, Ming Yuan Art Center, Shanghai, China

- 2013 *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, USA
Tutte le strade portano a Roma. 17 artisti contemporanei da Shanghai a Palazzo Brancaccio, Museo Nazionale D'Arte Orientale, Rome, Italy
Opening, Christian Duvernois Gallery, New York, USA
Yang Shi (Form), Z-Art Center, Shanghai, China
Portrait of the Times: 30 Years of Chinese Contemporary Art, Power Station of Art, Shanghai, China
Insightful Charisma, Shanghai Himalayas Museum, Shanghai, China
Voice of the Unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979-Today, Arsenale, Venice Biennale
Collateral Exhibition, Venice, Italy
Early Contemporary Art in Shanghai, Baoshan International Art Center, Shanghai, China
Contemporary Chinese Art, Halcyon Gallery, Shanghai, China
- 2012 *Culture Shanghai: A Return Oriented Towards the Future*, Shanghai Sculpture Space, Shanghai, China
Ink Now, Special Project of The SH Contemporary Art Fair, Shanghai, China
Water, Anacostia Art Museum, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC, USA
Undoing ShuiMo-Contemporary ShuiMo Exhibition, Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
A New Spirit in Ink: An Exhibition of Cutting Edge Ink Art, Zendai Contemporary Art Space, Shanghai, China
Shanghai! La Tentation de l'occident, L'Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez, Bordeaux, France
Abstraction, Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong, China
Line, Art Center of the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai, China
Water / Ink Biennial, DaFen Art Museum, Shenzhen, China
Ink Boundary, M50 Art Center, Shanghai, China
- 2011 *Celestial Abstraction*, Contemporary Art Museum, Rome, Italy
20 Years Retrospective Exhibition of 1991, San Diego Chinese Artistic Creation Seminar, Xian Art Museum, Xian, China
Selected Asian Cultural Council Fellows: Then and Now, Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong, China

- ShanShui*, Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, Switzerland
Sofia Paper Biennial, National Gallery of Foreign Art, Sofia, Bulgaria
Wu Ming: Form is Formless, Contrasts Gallery, Shanghai, China
Nature and Its Modern Forms, Ming Yuan Art Center, Shanghai, China
- 2010 *The Seventh Shenzhen International Chinese Ink Biennale*, Shenzhen, China
China Big Draft-Shanghai, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland
Speed and Chaos, PingYao International Photography Biennial, PingYao, China
Vestiges of a Process: Transition, Zendai Contemporary Art Center, Shanghai, China
Celestial Abstraction, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China
Shanghai, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California, USA
- 2009 *Ink Society*, Sunshine International Museum, Song Zhuang, Beijing, China
In-Situ: A Dialog with Space and Time, River South Art Center, Shanghai, China
Chinese Gardens for Living: Illusions to Reality, *Europalia: China International Arts Festival*, The Square, Brussels, Belgium
Shanghai Tang - History in the Making: Shanghai 1979-2009, Jumen Art Center, Shanghai, China
Yi Pai, Art Today Museum, Beijing, China
Direction of Ink Art, Zendai Zhujiyajiao Art Museum, Zhujiyajiao, China
A Starting Point: Intrude 366-Dynamics of Change and Growth, Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
- 2008 *Mountain & Water*, Dresden Art Museum, Dresden, Germany
Towards Abstraction: 1976-1985 Shanghai Contemporary Art, Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
Art Multiple, Ke Center for the Contemporary Arts, Shanghai, China
Speed of the Flows, Shanghai YuanDian Gallery, Shanghai, China
Vestiges of a Process: Shanghai Shikumen Project 2008, Intrude 366, Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
China Abstract Painting 30 Years, Caixa Forum Museum, Barcelona & Madrid, Spain
- 2007 *Rejected Collection*, Ke Center for Contemporary Arts, Shanghai, China
Asia / Europa Mediation, Poznan National Museum of Art, Poznan, Poland
3rd International Art Festival, Rajamangala University, Poh-Chang, Bangkok, Thailand

- Escape by Crafty Scheme-Salvation from Traditional and Revolutionary Language*, Square Gallery of Contemporary Art, Nanjing, China
Language / Environment, Museum of Contemporary Art Beijing, Beijing, China
- 2006 *Crossing the Atlantic*, Goldsmith's College, London, England
Entry Gate: Chinese Aesthetics of Heterogeneity, 1st Envisage, Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai, Shanghai, China
Experimental Ink, Contemporary Art Museum, Tianjin, China
Close to Home, BlockParty Brooklyn, New York, USA *New Chinese Occidentalism*, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York, USA
- 2005 *Flowing River: 30 Years of Chinese Oil Painting*, National Art Museum, Beijing, China
100 Years of Chinese Sculpture, Shanghai Sculpture Space, Shanghai, China
1st International Sculpture Biennale, Xujiahui Park, Shanghai, China
Black + White, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
Regards to 85, Duolun Art Museum, Shanghai, China
Replacement, Cathay Gallery, Beijing, China
Poles Apart Poles Together: Markers V, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
Anniversary Show, Beijing Film Institute, Beijing, China
- 2004 *The Fourth Shenzhen International Chinese Ink Biennale*, Shenzhen, China
Shanghai Abstract Survey-50 Years, Ming Yuan Art Center, Shanghai, China 10 / 20, Lui Hai Su Art Museum, Shanghai, China
A Grain of Dust A Drop of Water, The 5th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea
On the Edge, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York, America
- 2003 *10-Year Anniversary*, Art Projects International Gallery, New York, America
Breathe, New York University Gallery, New York, America
Brushworks: New Asian Calligraphy, Andrew Bae Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, America
Mountain & River, Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston, Texas, America
Diverse works Art Center, Houston, Texas, America
5=1, L.A. Artcore Gallery, Los Angeles, California, America
- 2002 *Urban Creation*, The Fourth Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
Guangzhou Triennial, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China
China East + West, Kunstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria

- China Triennial*, Metropolitan Museum of Guangzhou, Guangzhou, China
Markers II, EAM Gallery, Kassel, Germany
Variations of Ink, Chambers Fine Art, New York, USA
Contemporary Brush Strokes, China 2000 Gallery, New York, USA
Making China, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York, USA
- 2001 *1st Chengdu Biennial*, Chengdu, China
Markers, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
Metaphysics and Reality, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
Milestones for Peace, Weill Art Gallery, New York, USA
- 2000 *DMZ_2000*, Korean Gallery, New York, USA
Construction in Process VII: This Earth is a Flower, The International Artists' Museum, Lodz, Poland
Cow Parade, New York, New York, USA
Milestones for Peace, Jerusalem Art Festival, Jerusalem, Israel
Conceptual Ink, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York, USA
The International Artists' Museum in New York, Mercer Gallery, New York, USA
- 1999 *Wrap the World*, The Kitchen, New York, USA
Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, USA
Language, Ethan Cohen Fine Art, New York, USA
- 1998 *Observatoire 4 Galerie*, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Chinese Artists Working in New York, Purdue University Gallery, Indiana, USA
- 1997 *Basic Elements*, Art Beatus Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., Canada
Bank: Inside the Counting Room, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, USA
Art Projects International Gallery, New York, USA
Sculpture 1997, Connemara Conservancy Sculpture Park, Dallas, Texas, USA
- 1996 *Open Space*, Shanghai Art Museum Biennial, China
Pennsylvania University Art Museum, USA
Eastern Fusion: Contemporary Asian American Art in New York, Hillwood Art Museum, New York, USA

- 1995 Grosse Kunstaussstellung, Dusseldorf, Germany
Peace, Earth, Healing, Hiroshima, Japan
- 1993 *Construction in Process #4*, The Artists' Museum, Lodz, Poland
 93NY50, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, USA
- 1992 Ruine der Kunst, Berlin, Germany
Conversations, The Artists' Museum, Lodz, Poland
Workspace' 92, Jamaica Arts Center, New York, America Natural History
 Museum, New York, USA
- 1991 San Diego State University Gallery, California, America Annual, Asian
 American Art Centre, New York, USA
- 1990 East West Contemporary Inc. Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, USA Exhibition Space
 Gallery, New York, USA
- 1989 Nerlino Gallery, New York, USA
 Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
 Han Art Gallery, Hong Kong, China
China / Avant Garde, China National Art Gallery, Beijing, China
- 1988 *The Last Supper, performance*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China Art
 West / Art East Gallery, Hamburg, Germany
 Art Waves Gallery, New York, USA
 Art Museum of Nanjing, Nanjing, China
Annual, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 1987 Hong Kong Art Centre, Hong Kong, China
 Alisan Gallery, Hong Kong, China
 Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, USA
- 1986 Tokyo Municipal Museum, Tokyo, Japan
Shanghai Art Museum's New Building Completion Exhibition, Shanghai Art
 Museum, Shanghai, China
 First Shanghai Young Artists Competition Exhibition, Shanghai Art Museum,
 Shanghai, China

- 1985 *Annual*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
Shanghai Drama Institute Gallery, Shanghai, China
- 1983 *Painting Experiment*, Fudan University Faculty Center, Shanghai, China
- 1982 *Annual*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 1981 *Annual*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 1980 *Annual*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 1979 *Annual*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 1978 *Wild Roses*, Shanghai, China

Fellowships (selected)

- 2019 Artist in Residence, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK
- 2014 The New York Foundation for the Arts, Gregory Millard Fellowship in Sculpture
- 1997 The New York Foundation for the Arts, Sculpture
The Connemara Conservancy, Dallas, Texas, USA
- 1994 The Djerassi Foundation, Resident Artist Program, California, USA The
Gustavo Nicolich Fellowship and Permanent Collection
- 1987-1988 Asian Cultural Council, The Rockefeller Foundation, USA, (To create artwork in the United States, and to survey contemporary art.)

Grants / Honors (selected)

- 2002 The Annie Wong Foundation, Hong Kong, China
- 1996 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York, USA

- 1995 Art Matters Inc., New York, USA
- 1990 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York, USA
- 1986 First Prize, The Shanghai Young Artist's Exhibition, Shanghai, China

Collections (Selected)

Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA
 Djerassi Foundation Collection, California, USA
 Dow Jones Company, New Jersey, USA
 Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China
 International Artists Museum, Lodz, Poland
 Lehman Brothers, Hong Kong & New York, USA
 JP Morgan, Hong Kong, China
 M+ Museum for Visual Culture
 San Francisco Asian Art Museum, California, USA
 Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
 Shanghai City Government, Changning District, Shanghai, China Shenzhen Art Institute, Shenzhen,
 Uli Sigg Collection, Switzerland
 Frederick R. Weisman Foundation of Art, California, USA
 Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China
 White Rabbit Museum Collection, Sydney, Australia
 Ink Art Center, Kunshan, China
 K11 Art Foundation

Biographical information courtesy of: Leo Gallery, China
 <<https://www.leogallery.com.cn/artists/29-zhang-jian-jun/biography/>>; Pearl Lam Galleries, Shanghai <<https://www.pearllam.com/artist/zhang-jianjun/>>.

Li Shan 李山

1942 Born in Lanxi, Heilongjiang Province, China

Education

1968 Graduated from Arts Department (Oil Painting) of Shanghai Theater Academy, Shanghai, China

1963 Studied at the Heilongjiang University, Heilongjiang, China

Solo Exhibitions (Selected)

2017 *Li Shan Solo Exhibition, PSA Collection Series - Li Shan*, Power Station of Art, Shanghai

2014 *Extension Expansion*, MoCA@Loewen, Singapore

2012 *Reading Li Shan*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, Taiwan
Reading of Li Shan, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China

2005 *Reading, Photoworks 2003-2005*, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China

2004 *Li Shan - Small New Works*, ShanghART Fuxing Park, Shanghai, China

2002 *Reading, The New Works by Li Shan*, ShanghART Fuxing Park, Shanghai, China

2001 *Li Shan: Thou Are Not the Fish, A room with a view*, Shanghai, China

1990 *Solo Exhibition*, Shanghai Academy of Drama, Shanghai, China

Group Exhibitions (selected)

2019 *The Avant-Garde is Not Afraid of a Long March*, ShanghART Singapore, Side Lanes, ShanghART, Shanghai, China

- 2018 *From 1978 To 2018: Art History Shaped by 40 Artists*, Shanghai Powerlong Museum, Shanghai, China
White Flash, ShanghART Beijing, Beijing
Li Shan & Nobuo Sekine, Liang Project Co Space, Shanghai, China
Sense of Paper - Melting Point, L+ Space, Shanghai, China
- 2017 *The Reason Why Classic Is*, Artron Art Center, Shenzhen, China
Tracing The Past and Shaping The Future - Powerlong Museum Grand Opening, Powerlong Museum, Shanghai, China
Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA.
The Bond of Arts: Duolun International Contemporary Art Exhibition, Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
- 2016 *20*, Fosun Foundation, Shanghai, China
Expression versus Intention, Alchemy Art Space, Xi'an, China
Holzwege, ShanghART, Shanghai, China
New Capital, Huang Yu Collection Exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu, Chengdu, China
Chinese Whispers: Recent Art from the Sigg & M+ Sigg Collections, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland
- 2015 *Nonfigurative, Shanghai 21st Century*, Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China
City Vision, 2015 Shanghai Artists' Works Exhibition, Cloud Art Center, Shanghai, China
Paper, ShanghART Singapore, Singapore
- 2014 *Re-View, Opening Exhibition of Long Museum West Bund*, Long Museum (West Bund), Shanghai, China
Starlight, ShanghART Main Space, Shanghai, China
- 2013 *Portrait of the Times, 30 Years of Chinese Contemporary Art*, Power Station of Art, Shanghai, China
Coexist, Contemporary Art Exhibition, Homefun Art Space, Suzhou, China
Foundational Work II, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China
The Early Abstract Art in Shanghai, A Retrospective of Art History, Shanghai Baoshan International Folk Arts Exposition, Shanghai, China

- Four Quarters-3553, Exhibition Cycle of Chinese Contemporary Artists,*
HOW Art Museum, Wenzhou Branch, Wenzhou, China
Re-Reading, ShanghART Singapore, Singapore
Continental Divide, 10 Chinese Artists at Home and Abroad, artshare.com
- 2012 *Cultural Shanghai- A Return Oriented Towards the Future,* 2012 Shanghai
Gallery Alliance, Shanghai, China
Living-Being, Sino-Dutch Contemporary Art Exhibition, Songzhuang Art
Center, Beijing, China
- 2011 *Nature Contract,* Shanghai Times square, Shanghai, China
- 2010 *Lian Chen Jue,* Hou Hou Art, Shanghai, China, China
Made in Popland, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea
Thirty Years of Chinese Contemporary Art, Minsheng Art Museum,
Shanghai
China
Fairy Tales Selections from the MaGMA's Collection, Opera Gallery,
Singapore
- 2009 *Collision, Experimental Cases of Contemporary Chinese Art,* CAFA Art
Museum, Beijing, China
Shanghai History in Making from 1979 Till 2009, Shanghai, China
In the 1980s-Wen Pulin Archive of Chinese Avant-garde Art Exhibition,
Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
Warm Up, Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China
On Paper, Group Show of ShanghART Artists, ShanghART, Shanghai, China
Yi Pai: Century Thinking, A Contemporary Art Exhibition, Today Art
Museum, Beijing, China
Another Scene, Artists' Projects, Concepts and Ideas, ShanghART H-Space,
Shanghai, China
- 2008 *Five Years of Duolun, Chinese Contemporary Art Retrospective Exhibition,*
Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
Accumulations—The Spirit of the East, Asia Art Center, Beijing, China
Blackbridge 08' Contemporary Art Exhibition, Art Gallery Blackbridge,
Beijing, China

- 2007 *85 New Wave, The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing, China
Strategy on Paper, Works on Paper Invitational Exhibition, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, China
Chinese Contemporary Socart, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia
- 2006 *Art in Motion*, MoCA, Shanghai, China
Witness, Blue Dreamland Gallery, Chengdu, China
Fiction@Love, Forever Young Land, The Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), Shanghai, China
- 2005 *The Wall, Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, Millennium Art Museum, Beijing, China; Albright-Knox Art Gallery; University at Buffalo Anderson Gallery; University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, USA.
Mahjong, Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland
Study Practice, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China
- 2003 *Open Sky, Grand Opening of Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art*, Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
Subversion and Poetry, Contemporary Chinese Art, Culturgest, Lisbon, Portugal
Dajia - Studying on Design from Contemporary Art, The Museum of Fudan University, Shanghai, China
- 2002 *The First Guangzhou Triennale - Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)*, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China
Paris-Pekin, Chinese Contemporary Art Exhibition, Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris, France
- 2001 *Shanghai Star*, Casula Art Centre, Sydney, Australia
- 2000 *Futuro, Chinese Contemporary Art*, Contemporary Art Centre, Macau, China
- 1999 *Difference Apperceive*, Liu Haisu Art Museum, Shanghai, China

- 1998 *New Voices: Contemporary Art Dialogue Among*, Liu Haisu Art Museum, Shanghai , China; Hong Kong Art Center, Hong Kong , China; National Taiwan Art Education Institute, Taipei, Taiwan
Inside Out, New Chinese Art, Exhibition of Art from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, Asia Society Galleries; PS1, New York, USA; SFMoMA / Asian Art Galleries, San Francisco USA; Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Monterrey, Mexico; Tacoma Art Museum and the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA, USA, USA; Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, China
- 1997 *Faces and Bodies of the Middle Kingdom, Chinese Art of the 1990's*, Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague, Czech; OTSO Gallery, Espoo, Finland
- 1995 *Chinese New Art 1989-93*, Vancouver Art Museum, Vancouver, Canada
Des Pais del Centre, Avantgardes Artistiques Xineses, Santa Monica Art Centre, Barcelona, Spain
- 1994 *Building the Rouge Empire: Paintings from 1976-1992*, Alisan Fine Arts at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong
22nd International Biennial of Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 1993 *45th International Art Exhibition Venice Biennale - Cardinal Points of the Arts*, Venice, Italy
Chinese Art: Post-1989, Marlborough Gallery, London, UK
Mao Goes Pop, China Post '89, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Victoria National Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
China Avant-garde, Touring Exhibition, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Hildesheim Art Gallery, Germany; Kunsthall Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Brandts Klaederfabrik, Odense, Denmark; Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, U.K.
China's New Art, Post-1989, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong
- 1992 *Encountering the Others - Projektgruppe Stoffwechsel*, Documenta Kassel, Kassel, Germany
- 1989 *Modern Painters from the People's Republic of China*, Galerie Werner Melletin, Cologne, Germany
China/Avant-Garde Art Exhibition, National Art Museum of China, Beijing

- 1988 *Second Concave – Convex Installation Exhibition, The last Supper,*
Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 1987 *A State of Transition, Contemporary Painting from Shanghai,* Asian Fine
Arts at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong
- 1986 *First Shanghai Concave-Convex Exhibition,* Xuhui Cultural Centre, Shanghai
Shanghai Art Museum's New Building Completion Exhibition, Shanghai Art
Museum, Shanghai, China
- 1983 *Art and Experiment of 83 (Stage'83: Paintings Experiments),* Fudan
University, Shanghai, China
- 1982 *Painting the Chinese Dream, Chinese Art 30 Years after the Revolution,*
Smith College, Northampton Ma; City Hall, Boston, Ma; Brooklyn
Museum, New York, USA.

Collections

M+Collection, Hong Kong, China

Long Museum, Shanghai, China

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA

Yuz Foundation, Jakarta, Indonesia

Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan

Uli Sigg Collection, Switzerland

Biographical information courtesy of: ShanghArt, Shanghai, China

<<https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/artists/name/lishan/bio>>.

Yu Youhan 余友涵

1943 Born in Shanghai, China

Education

1973 Graduated from the Central Academy of Art & Design (now Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University), Beijing, China

Solo Exhibitions

2018 *The Representational and The Abstract*, The Long Museum, Chongqing
Yu Youhan: The Representational and The Abstract, ShanghART, Shanghai, China

2017 *YU YOU HAN*, C+Gallery, Tomson Riviera, Shanghai, China

2016 *Yu Youhan Retrospective*, PSA China Contemporary Art Collection Series, Power Station of Art, Shanghai, China
YU YOUHAN 1973-1988, Long Museum (West Bund), Shanghai, China

2013 *YU Youhan: Yībān, YU Youhan's First Solo Exhibition in Beijing*, Yuan Space, Beijing, China

2012 *YU Youhan: Home, Bi-Cities: Solo Exhibitions of Chinese New Painting*, Tian Ren He Yi Art Center, Hangzhou, China

2011 *Yu Youhan's Paintings*, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China

2008 *Yu Youhan: New Abstract Paintings*, Shanghai Art Fair-Outstanding Artists Section, Shanghai, China

2004 *Yu Youhan, Landscape of Yi Meng Shan*, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China

1999 *Ah! Us*, ShanghART Fuxing Park, Shanghai, China

1998 *Yu Youhan*, Gallery Sonne, Berlin, Germany

1996 *Yu Youhan*, Maison de la Chine, Paris, France

Group Exhibitions

2019 *Side Lanes*, ShanghART, Shanghai, China

2018 *From 1978 To 2018: Art History Shaped by 40 Artists*, Shanghai Powerlong Museum, Shanghai, China

Shanghai Beat - The Dynamism of Contemporary Art Scene in Shanghai, Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan

White Flash, ShanghART Beijing, Beijing, China

Shanghai Painters, N3 Contemporary Art, Beijing, China

Approach Spirits, N3 Contemporary Art, 798 Art District, Beijing, China

Avant-garde Shanghai: 30 Year Literature Exhibition of Shanghai Contemporary Art (1979-2010), Mingyuan Art Museum, Shanghai, China

Sense of Paper - Melting Point, L+ Space, Shanghai, China

2017 *The Reason Why Classic Is*, Artron Art Center, Shenzhen, China

Troposphere, Chinese and Brazilian Contemporary Art, Beijing Minsheng Art Museum, Beijing, China

Shanghai Galaxy II, Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China

Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA.

Graffiti and Calligraphy: 6 Abstract Artists in China, Arario Gallery, Shanghai, China

The Source of the Image, Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition, Epoch Art Museum, Wenzhou, China

2016 *20*, Fosun Foundation, Shanghai, China

Holzwege, ShanghART, Shanghai, China

Abstraction and Beyond: A Research-Based Tour Exhibition of Chinese Art, Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China

The World is Yours, as well as Ours, White Cube, London, UK

- Geomancy-ink changing--Misreading and Regeneration of Chinese Ink*, Alioth Art Center, Shanghai, China
- New Capital*, Huang Yu Collection Exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu, Chengdu, China
- Too Loud A Solitude*, Stalkers of Chinese Contemporary Art, Hive Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China
- 2015 *City Vision*, 2015 Shanghai Artists' Works Exhibition, Cloud Art Center, Shanghai, China
- Elixir*, Biennale Italia-China 2015, Turin, Italy
- Garden Splendors*, Chinese Contemporary Art Invitational Exhibition, Suzhou Jinji Lake Art Museum, China
- 2014 *Just as Money is the Paper, the Gallery is the Room*, Osage Gallery, Shanghai, China
- Broken. Stand*, The New Painting to Order, Long Museum, Shanghai, China
- Hans van Dijk: 5000 Names*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing; Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- Original Home*, JIA Pingwa Culture and Art Center, Xi'an, Shanxi, China
- Re-View*, Opening Exhibition of Long Museum West Bund, Long Museum (West Bund), Shanghai, China
- A Fragment in the Course of Time*, Landscape of Chinese Ink Art in 1980s, Himalayas Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 5 Plus*, ShanghART Beijing, Beijing, China
- Starlight*, ShanghART Main Space, Shanghai, China
- 2013 *Shanghai/Paris*, Modern Art of China, China Art Museum, Shanghai
- Clutch*, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China
- One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, Us and Institution, Us as Institution, Times Museum, Guangzhou, China
- Foundational Work II*, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China
- The 55th Venice Biennale Parallel Exhibition*, Independent Chinese Art Exhibition: Voice of the Unseen, Venice, Italy

- The Early Abstract Art in Shanghai, A Retrospective of Art History*, Shanghai Baoshan International Folk Arts Exposition, Shanghai, China
- Four Quarters-3553*, Exhibition Cycle of Chinese Contemporary Artists, HOW Art Museum, Wenzhou Branch, Wenzhou, China
- Art 500*, Halcyon Gallery, Shanghai, China
- Re-Reading*, ShanghART Singapore, Singapore
- Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu, Fujian: Four Chinese Contemporary Artists*, Yuehu Gallery, Shanghai, China
- Continental Divide*, 10 Chinese Artists at Home and Abroad, artshare.com
- Foundational Work*, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China
- 2012 *Cultural Shanghai- A Return Oriented Towards the Future*, 2012 Shanghai Gallery Alliance, Shanghai, China
- 2xHelbling in Shanghai*, IG Halle, Kunst(zeug)haus, Rapperswil, Switzerland
- Face*, Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 2010 *Made in Popland*, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea
- Landscape in Transition*, Yuzi Paradise International Art Symposium, Yuehu Gallery, Shanghai, China
- Reshaping History: Chinart from 2000-2009*, Special Documenta, China National Convention Center, Beijing, China
- San Sheng Wan Wu, Opening Exhibition*, Zendai Contemporary Art Exhibition Hall, Shanghai, China
- 2009 *Santa's Workshop Shanghai*, Selected works, toys and artists' editions, James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai, China
- Out of Shanghai*, Museum gegenstandsfreier Kunst, Otterndorf, Germany
- Shanghai History in Making from 1979 Till 2009*, Shanghai, China
- Warm Up*, Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- On Paper*, Group Show of ShanghART Artists, ShanghART, Shanghai, China
- Yi Pai: Century Thinking, A Contemporary Art Exhibition*, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China
- The China Project—Three Decades: The Contemporary Chinese Collection*, Queensland Art Gallery, Australia

Another Scene, Artists' Projects, Concepts and Ideas, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China

Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass, USA.

2008 *Five Years of Duolun, Chinese Contemporary Art Retrospective Exhibition*, Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China

Cheng Xiang, Opening Exhibition of Shanghai Eye Level Gallery, Eye Level Gallery, Shanghai, China

Speed of the Flows, Invited Artists Exhibition of Nominated Contemporary Artworks, Yuandian Gallery, Shanghai, China

Writing on the Wall, Chinese New Realism and Avant-Garde in the Eighties and Nineties, The Groninger Museum, Groningen, The Netherlands

Red Aside, Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection, The Joan Miró Foundation, Barcelona, Spain, China

2007 *85 New Wave, The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing, China

Strategy on Paper, Works on Paper Invitational Exhibition, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, China

2006 *Witness*, Blue Dreamland Gallery, Chengdu, China

2006 Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition, Mingyuan Art Center, Shanghai, China

2005 *Mahjong, Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland

Study Practice, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China

2004 *Dreaming of the Dragon's Nation, Contemporary Art from China*, IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Dublin, Ireland

Chine, le corps partout? (China, the body everywhere?), Museum of Contemporary Art, Marseilles, France

- 2003 *Prayer Beads and Brush Strokes*, Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, Dashanzi, Beijing, China
- 2002 *Paris-Pekin*, Chinese Contemporary Art Exhibition, Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris, France
- 2001 *Made by Chinese #3. Chinese Pop*, Galerie Navarra, Paris, France
Shanghai Star, Casula Art Centre, Sydney, Australia
- 2000 *Futuro*, Chinese Contemporary Art, Contemporary Art Centre, Macau, China
- 1999 *Fortune Global Forum*, Contemporary Art Exhibition, Jinmao Podium Bldg., Shanghai, China
- 1997 *15 Contemporary Chinese Artists*, National Art Association, Portugal
Faces and Bodies of the Middle Kingdom, Chinese Art of the 1990', Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague, Czech; OTSO Gallery, Espoo, Finland
- 1996 *Reckoning with the Past, Contemporary Chinese Painting*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, UK
- 1995 *Change - Chinese Contemporary Art*, Konsthallen Goetaplatsen, Goeteborg, Sweden
Des Pais del Centre, Avantguardes Artistiques Xineses, Santa Monica Art Centre, Barcelona, Spain
- 1994 *22nd International Biennial of Sao Paulo*, Brazil
- 1993 *45th International Art Exhibition Venice Biennale - Cardinal Points of the Arts*, Venice, Italy
The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
Mao Goes Pop, China Post '89, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Victoria National Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

China Avant-garde, Touring Exhibition, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Hildesheim Art Gallery, Germany; Kunsthall Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Brandts Klaederfabrik, Odense, Denmark; Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, UK

China's New Art, Post-1989, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong

1991 *Materials*, Beijing; Nanjing; Chongqing, China

1989 *China/Avant-Garde Art Exhibition*, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China

1988 *Exhibition of Today's Art*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai
Today, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China

1986 *First Shanghai Concave-Convex Exhibition*, Xuhui Cultural Centre, Shanghai
Shanghai Art Museum's New Building Completion Exhibition, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China

Projects

2016 *The Meeting Room*, Nr. 40, Nan Dan Road, Shanghai, China

2014 *The Journey of Art*, Follow-up exhibition of John Moores Painting Prize, Artemis, Shanghai, China

2011 *Party*, Sheraton Shanghai Hongkou Hotel, Shanghai, China

Collections

Guggenheim Museum-Abu Dhabi, The United Arab Emirates

Pacific Asia Museum at University of Southern California, USA

Power Station of Art, Shanghai, China

Long Museum, Shanghai; Chongqing, China

M+Collection, Hong Kong, China

Denver Art Museum, Denver, USA

Yuz Foundation, Jakarta, Indonesia

Zabludowicz Collection, London, UK

Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia

Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China

Hammer Museum, Gift of the Haudenschild Collection, Los Angeles, USA

Uli Sigg Collection, Switzerland

Biographical information courtesy of: ShanghArt, Shanghai, China

< <https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/artist.htm?artistId=9§ion=bio>>.

Chen Zhen 陈箴

1955 - 2000 Born in Shanghai, China, Died in Paris, France

Education and teaching

- 1973 Shanghai School of Fine Arts and Crafts.
- 1976 Professor of Shanghai Fine Arts and Crafts School.
- 1978 Shanghai Drama Institute set design.
- 1982 Professor of Shanghai Drama Institute.
- 1986-1989 École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris
- 1989 Institut des Hautes Études en Arts plastiques of Paris.
- 1991 Visiting artist and professor at École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts of Paris.
- 1993-1995 Assistant Professor at Institut des Hautes Études en arts plastiques of Paris.
- 1995-1999 Professor, École nationale des beaux-arts de Nancy, France.
- 1997 Visiting professor at CCA, Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2017 *Chen Zhen*, Galleria Continua/ Havana, Cuba
- 2016 *Chen Zhen, Jardin-Lavoir*, Galleria Continua / Les Moulins, France
- 2015 *Chen Zhen*, Frith Street Gallery in collaboration with Galleria Continua, London, UK
Chen Zhen: Without going to New York and Paris, life could be internationalized, curated by Hou Hanru, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, China (cat.)
Chen Zhen. Accrochage special, Galleria Continua /, Les Moulins, France

- 2014 *Chen Zhen. In-Between*, Blue Project Foundation, Barcelona, Spain (cat.)
Purification Room, Le Cent-quatre, Paris, France
Fragments d'éternité, Galerie Perrotin, Paris, France
- 2012 *Chen Zhen, Même lit, rêves différents*, Faurschou Foundation, Beijing, China
- 2011 *Chen Zhen*, de Sarthe Gallery, Hong Kong, China (cat.)
Chen Zhen, Les pas silencieux, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy
- 2010 *Chen Zhen*, Musée Guimet, Paris, France
Purification Room, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy
La Digestion Perpetuelle, Musée Léon-Dierx, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, France
- 2008 *La Danse de la Fontaine Emergente*, Public commission by la Ville de Paris, Place Augusta Holmes, Rue Paul Klee, Paris 13e, France permanent installation (cat.)
Chen Zhen. Il corpo come paesaggio, curated by Gerald Matt and Ilse Lafer, Mart, Rovereto, Italy (cat.)
- 2007 *Chen Zhen. Der Körper als Landschaft*, curated by Gerald Matt, Kunsthalle Vienna, Austria (cat.)
Jardin mémorable, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy
- 2006 *Chen Zhen*, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China (cat.).
Merging of East and West. The Installations of Chen Zhen, Sturgis Library Gallery, Kennesaw State University, New York, USA (cat.)
- 2005 *Transexpériences*, Galleria Continua, Beijing, China (cat.)
La lumière intérieure du corps humain, Castello di Ama, Gaiole in Chianti, Italy, permanent installation.
- 2004 *Prayer Wheel – "Money Makes the Mare Go" (Chinese Slang)*, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy
Une soirée en l'honneur de Chen Zhen, Académie de France à Rome – Villa Medici, Rome, Italy
Chen Zhen. Dancing Body – Drumming Mind, GEM-Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, The Netherlands

- 2003 *Chen Zhen. Silence sonore*, curated by Jérôme Sans, Palais de Tokyo, Site de création contemporaine, Paris, France (cat.)
Chen Zhen, Le Festival d'automne à Paris, Espace Topographie de l'Art, Paris, France
Résidence-Résonance-Résistance, curated by Maité Vissault, Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, Germany (cat.).
Chen Zhen. Un artista fra Oriente e Occidente, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, PAC, Milan, Italy (cat.)
Chen Zhen: a Tribute, organised by Antoine Guerrero, P.S.1, New York, USA (cat.)
- 2002 *Chen Zhen. Inner Body Landscapes*, ICA – Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, USA, 18 September - 31 December (video)
Résidence-Résonance-Résistance, curated by Alain Julien-Laferrrière, CCC – Centre de création contemporaine, Tours, France (cat.)
Chen Zhen. Metaphors of the Body, curated by Anna Kafetsi, EMST-National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece (cat.)
- 2001 *Chen Zhen. Le Produit naturel / Le Produit artificiel*, Castello di Ama, Gaiole, Chianti, Italy
In memoriam. Chen Zhen. 1955-2000, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, Austria
Omaggio a Chen Zhen, L'Arte per la Città per l'Arte, 3a Rassegna d'Arte Contemporanea, Fortino di Sant'Antonio, Bari, Italy (cat.)
Chen Zhen, curated by Lisa G. Corrin, Serpentine Gallery, London, UK (cat.)
Hommage a Chen Zhen. Silent Synergy Paris-Shanghai, ARC Musée de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France and Shanghart Gallery, Shanghai, China
Chen Zhen, Maison portable, Art & Public, Geneva, Switzerland
- 2000 *The Ritual Music – Daily Incantations*, Cité de la musique, Paris, France
Field of Sinergy, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, (Siena), Italy (cat.)
Six Roots, curated by Zelimir Koscevic, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, Croatia (cat.)
Chen Zhen, Elogio della Magia Nera – In Praise of Black Magic – Éloge de la Magie Noire, curated by Alessandra Pace, GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, Italy (cat.)
Jardin-Lavoir, curated by Jackie-Ruth Meyer, Jean-Claude Lattes, Cimaïse & Portique – Centre départemental d'art contemporain, Albi, France (cat.)

Nightly Imprecations, Art & Public, Geneva, Switzerland

- 1999 *Chen Zhen, entre thérapie et méditation*, ADDC – Espace culturel François Mitterrand, Périgueux, France (cat.)
- 1998 *Chen Zhen, entre thérapie et méditation*, Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, France (cat.)
Jue Chang/Fifty Strokes to Each, curated by Nehama Guralnink, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel (cat.)
Jardin Mouvement Méditation, École Nationale Supérieure de Géologie, Vandœuvre - les - Nancy, France, permanent installation.
- 1997 *Fu Dao/Fu Dao, Upside-down Buddha – Arrival at Good Fortune*, CCA – Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, Japan (cat.)
- 1996 *Chen Zhen*, Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montreal, Canada (cat.)
La Digestion perpétuelle, curated by François Cheval and Colette Léonard, Musée Léon- Dierx, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, France (cat.)
Daily Incantations, Deitch Projects, New York, USA
- 1995 *No Way to Sky, No Door to Earth*, Jean Bernier Gallery, Athens, Greece
Field of Purification, Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, France
- 1994 *Chen Zhen*, curated by Jérôme Sans, École nationale d'art de Nancy, Nancy, France
Field of Waste, curated by France Morin, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, USA(cat. & video)
- 1993 *The Fire – Water as Purification*, Dany Keller Galerie, Munich, Germany
La Maison de "l'autel ", Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Light of Confession, Central Museum, Utrecht, The Netherlands
Polymorphie, Galerie Michel Rein, Tours, France
- 1992 *Éruption future*, organised by Hélène Valentin, Arts 04, Centre d'art contemporain de Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France (cat.)

Chen Zhen au Magasin, Le Magasin – Centre national d’art contemporain (CNAC), Grenoble, France (cat.)

Objets illuminés la nuit, Galleria Vivita, Florence, Italy

La Porte de re-naissance, Espace des arts, Colomiers, France (cat.)

1991 *Natur und Objekt – Ready-Made Mumifikation*, Dany Keller Galerie, Munich Germany

Chen Zhen, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA), Paris, France (cat.)

Chen Zhen, Galleria Valentina Moncada, Rome, Italy (cat.)

1990 *Chen Zhen*, organized by Hangar 028, in collaboration with the Musée départemental des Vosges, Espace Cour de mai, Paris, France (cat.)

1989 Hôtel des Sociétés, Verdun, France

1986 Drama Institute Gallery, Shanghai, China

Shanghai Art Museum’s New Building Completion Exhibition, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China

Biographical information courtesy of: Galleria Continua

<<https://www.galleriacontinua.com/artists/chen-zhen-83/biography>>.

Cai Guoqiang 蔡国强

1957 Born in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, China

Education

1985 Shanghai Theater Academy, Department of Stage Design

Selected exhibitions

- 2019 Flora Commedia: Cai Guo-Qiang at the Uffizi, City of Florence, Italy
- 2012 *Cai Guo Qiang: A Clan of Boats*, Faurschou Foundation, Copenhagen, Denmark
Cai Guo-Qiang: Sky Ladder, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California, USA
- 2011 *Cai Guo-Qiang: Saraab*, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar
Cai Guo-Qiang: Resplendor y Soledad. Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), Ciudad Universitaria, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)
- 2010 *Cai Guo-Qiang: fallen blossoms*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
- 2009 *Cai Guo-Qiang: Hanging Out in the Museum*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan
Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, USA 2008; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain
- 2007 *Inopportune: Stage One and Illusion*, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA
- 2006 *Cai Guo-Qiang on the Roof: Transparent Monument*, Metropolitan Museum of Art Roof Garden, New York City, USA
- 2005 Arte all'Arte, Colle di Val d'Elsa,
Curated the first China Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale
Tornado: Explosion Project for the Festival of China, Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. USA

- Cai Guo-Qiang: Inopportune*, Mass MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, USA
- 2004 *Cai Guo-Qiang: Traveler*, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA
Organizing and curating *BMoCA: Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art*, Kinmen, Taiwan
- 2003 *Light Cycle: Explosion Project for Central Park*, New York, USA
Ye Gong Hao Long: Explosion Project for Tate Modern, Tate Modern, London, UK
- 2002 *Transient Rainbow*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
Cai Guo-Qiang, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
- 2001 *APEC Cityscape Fireworks Show*, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, Shanghai, China
Cai Guo-Qiang: An Arbitrary History, Musée d'art Contemporain, Lyon, France
- 2000 *Cai Guo-Qiang*, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France
- 1997 *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century*, Queens Museum of Art, Queens, New York, USA
Flying Dragon in the Heavens, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humblebaek, Denmark
- 1994 *The Earth Has Its Black Hole Too*, Hiroshima, Japan
- 1993 *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters*, Jiayuguan City, China
- 1992 *Wailing Wall: From the Engine of Four Hundred Cars*, IBM Kawasaki Gallery, Japan
Encountering the Others: The Kassel International Art Exhibition, various sites, Kassel, Germany
- 1991 *Primeval Fireball: The Project for Projects, P3 art and environment*, Tokyo, Japan (exh.cat.)

Asian Wave: China, Tokyo Gallery, Japan
Exceptional Passage: Chinese Avant-Garde Artists Exhibition, Mitsubishi-jisho
 Artium and Kashii former train yard, Fukuoka, Japan (exh cat.)

1990 *Works 1988/89*, Osaka Contemporary Art Center, Japan
Chine demain pour hier, Aix-en-Provence, France
 7th Japan Ushimado International Art Festival, Okayama, Japan

1989 *Explosions and Space Holes*, Kigoma, Tokyo, Japan

1987 *Cai Guo-Qiang's Painting*, Office of the Foreign Correspondent's Club of
 Japan, Tokyo, Japan
 Gunpowder Art, Kigoma, Tokyo, Japan

1985 *The Shanghai - Fujian Youth Modern Art Joint Exhibition*, Fuzhou City Yushan
 Art Museum, China

Awards (selected)

2016 The Bonnefanten Award for Contemporary Art (BACA)

2015 The Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation Award

2012 The Praemium Imperiale, an award that recognizes lifetime achievement in
 the arts in categories not covered by the Nobel Prize.

The U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts award for outstanding
 commitment to international cultural exchange.

2009 20th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize

2008 Director of Visual and Special Effects for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies
 of the Summer Olympics in Beijing, China

1999 Golden Lion award at the 48th Venice Biennale

1997 Oribe Award, Gifu, Japan

- 1995 P.S.I. The Institute for Contemporary Art: National and International Studio
Program, Asian Cultural Council Grant, New York, USA
- 1995 Japan Cultural Design Prize, Tokyo, Japan
- 1995 Benesse Prize in conjunction with *TransCulture*, 46th Venice Biennale, Venice,
Italy

Biographical information courtesy of: Galleria Continua, Beijing

<<http://galleriacontinua.cn/artists/cai-guo-qiang-12/biography.php>>; Cai Guoqiang's
website <<https://caiguoqiang.com/>>.

Gu Wenda 谷文达

1955 Born in Shanghai, China

Education

1976 Shanghai School of Arts

1981 MFA from China Academy of Arts

1981- 1987 Private study under the classical landscape master, Lu Yanshao

Solo Exhibitions (selected)

- 2004 *Forest of stone steles - retranslation & rewriting tang poetry*, Hong Kong Performing Arts Center, Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum, Hong Kong, China
Wenda Gu: From Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium, Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, USA
Wenda Gu: From Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium, Art Museum, Bates College, Maine, USA
Wenda Gu's wedding life #6, an art performance, Art Museum, Bates College, Maine, USA
Wenda Gu's phrase neon project 'fu lai jia mo' Salvatore Ferragamo, 5th Ave, New York, USA
- 2003 *Wenda Gu: From Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*, University of North Texas, USA
Wenda Gu: From Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium, Kansas Art Institute, Kansas City, USA
- 2001 *Translation & intersection - Wenda Gu's new installations*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Tug of War, an art performance, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Wenda Gu's wedding life - Germany, an art performance, The House of World Cultures, Berlin, Germany
Wenda Gu's selected works, Hanart gallery, Hong Kong, China
Ink alchemy #3, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, Australia
Ink alchemy #1, Enrico Navarra Gallery, Paris, France

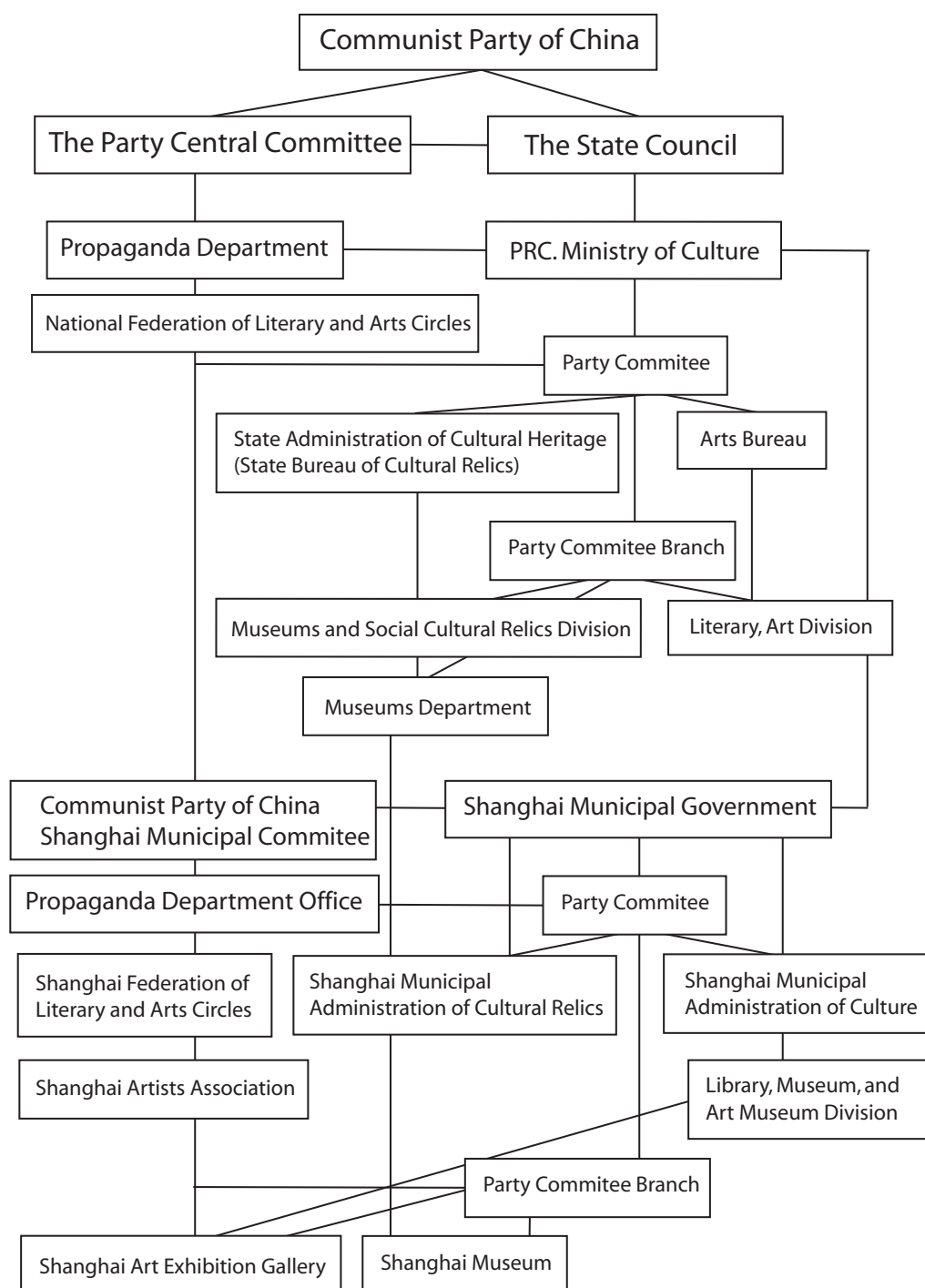
- 2000 *United Nations-Great Wall of the Millennium*, Art Center, New York State University, Buffalo, USA
Wenda Gu's Wedding Life - Japan, Art Performance, Utsunomiya Museum of Art, Japan
Wenda Gu's Wedding Life - Hong Kong, Art Performance, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, China
- 1999 *United Nations-Babel of the Millennium*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA
Wenda Gu's Wedding Life -America, Art Performance, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, USA
- 1998 *United Nations-Vancouver Monument: The Metamorphosis*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
Confucius Diary, Art Performance, Downtown Vancouver, Canada
- 1997 *United Nations-Hong Kong Monument: The Historical Clash*, made for Hong Kong handover 1997, Hanart gallery, Hong Kong
United Nations-Taiwan Monument: The Mythos of Lost Dynasties", Hanart Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
Blackness, Solo Art Performance, Hanart Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
- 1996 *United Nations-USA Monument #2: Dreamerica*, Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York City, USA
United Nations-Britain Monument: The Maze, Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, camerawork, London, England, UK
The Mythos of Lost Dynasties, Binet Gallery, Tel-Aviv, Israel
- 1995 *Enigma Beyond Joy & Sin*, Alternative Museum, New York City, USA
United Nations-USA Monument #1: post-cmoellotniinaglpiostm, Space Untitled Gallery, New York City, USA
The Enigma of Blood, Khan Gallery, New York City, USA
- 1994 *Enigma Beyond Joy & Sin*, Main Gallery, the University of Rhode Island, USA
United Nations-Italy Monument: God & Children", Enrico Gariboldi Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy
Enigma Beyond Joy & Sin, Berlin Shafire Gallery, New York City, USA

- 1993 *The Mythos of Lost Dynasties*, Hanart gallery, Hong Kong
- 1992 Enrico Gariboldi Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy
Wallace Anderson Gallery, Bridgewater State University, USA
- 1990 *Two Thousand National Deaths*, Hatley Martin Gallery, San Francisco, USA
Red Black White Desert, University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach & Los Angeles Festival, USA
DP Fong Gallery, San Jose, USA
- 1987 University Art Gallery, York University, Toronto, Canada
Yangtze Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- 1986 Artist Gallery, Xian, China
SAM's New Building Completion Exhibition, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China

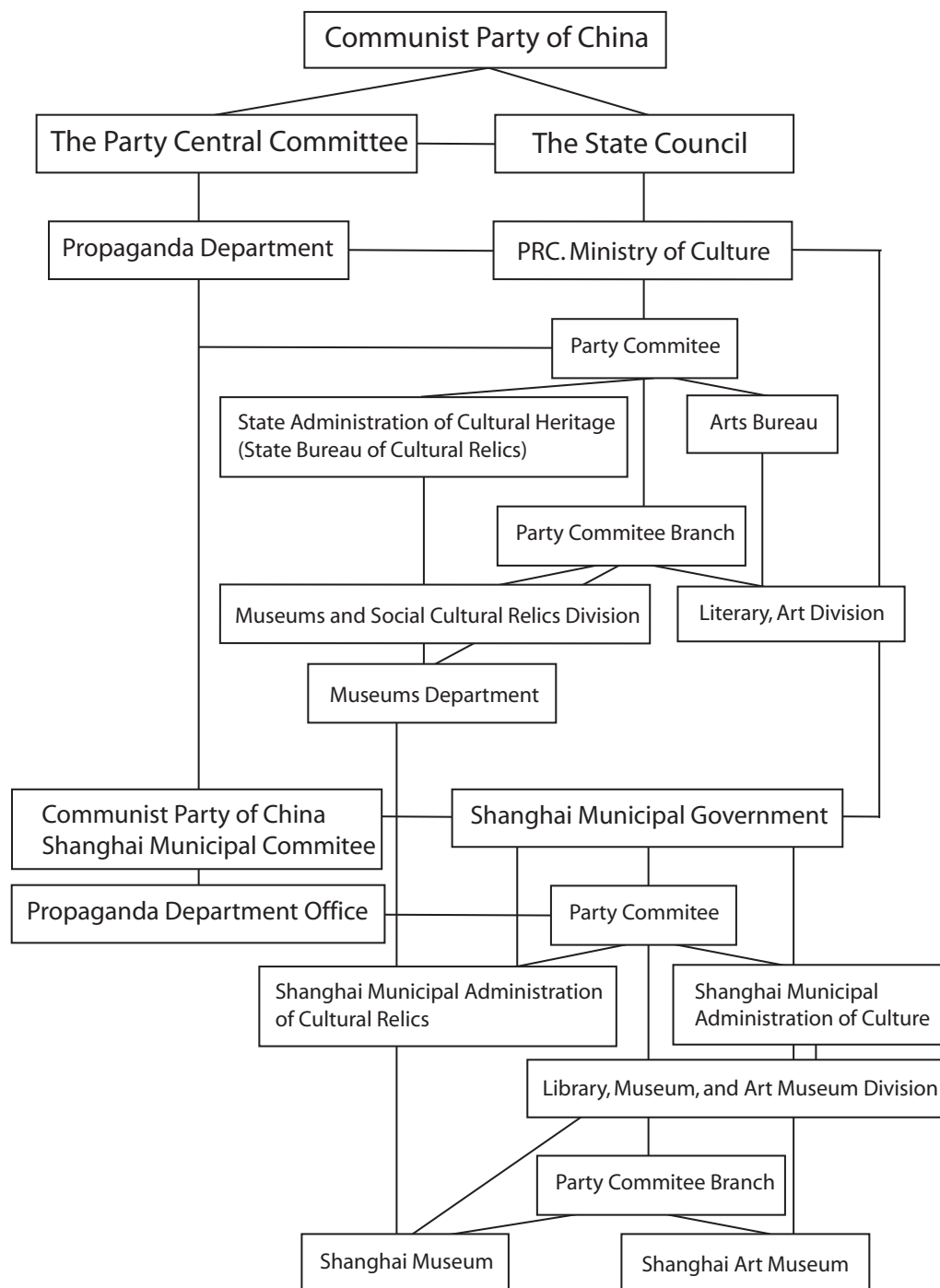
Biographical information courtesy of: Artist Website <<http://wendagu.com/home.html>>.

Appendix 2.

Two Diagrams on the Chinese Bureaucratic Structure of Cultural Organisations



(Before the change from SAEG to SAM in the 1980s.)



(After the change from SAEG to SAM in the 1980s.)

Bibliography

NOTE: This thesis is based largely on primary source materials. These include interviews, archival documents and published material such as art catalogues and essays on art since the 1980s. I also evaluate and provide extensive visual analysis of key art works discussed in the case studies. These primary sources together with the secondary source material used for the thesis are also listed in the text and footnotes in the body of the thesis.

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Fang, Zengxian. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 10 January 2009; 08 September 2017).

Gordon, Fred. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 20 November 2011).

Gu Wenda, Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai, 31 July 2016).

Huang, Azhong. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 03 July 2017).

Lambert, Patricia. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 29 November 2012).

Li, Shan. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, Li Shan's studio, (Shanghai: 08 October 2011; 07 November 2013).

Li, Xiangyang. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 11 October 2011).

Palmer, Meredith. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording (Shanghai: 10 September 2011).

Wang, Zheng. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 07 December 2017).

Wu, Liang. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 02 March 2005).

Yu, Youhan. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recording, (Shanghai: 16 December 2013).

Zhang, Jianjun. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, audio recordings, (Shanghai: 10 November 2004; 04 May 2008).

Zhang, Jianjun. Interview by Lansheng Zhang, (Shanghai: 10 August 2018).

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Glossary of Terms

The following provides the English, the Pin Yin Romanisation system, and Chinese (simplified) characters for key terms, institutions, movements and publications used throughout this thesis.

Artist and other associations and groups

China Artists Association (CAA).	Zhōngguó měishù jiā xiéhuì	中国美术家协会
China Artists Association Anhui Branch (CAAAB),	Zhōngguó měishù jiā xiéhuì ānhuī fēnhuì	中国美术家协会安徽分会
China Artists Association Hubei Branch (HBCAA)	Zhōngguó měishù jiā xiéhuì húběi fēnhuì	中国美术家协会湖北分会
China Independent Art Association	Zhōngguó dúlì měishù xiéhuì	中华独立美术协会
China National Federation of Literary and Arts Circles	Zhōngguó wénxué yìshù jiè liánhé huì	中国文学艺术界联合会
Chinese People 's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC)	zhōngguó rénming duìwài yǒuhǎo xiéhuì	中国人民对外友好协会
Ministry of Culture	Wénhuà bù	文化部
Shanghai Artists Association	Shànghǎi měishù jiā xiéhuì	上海美术家协会
Shanghai Federation Literary and Art Circles	Shànghǎi Wénxué yìshù jiè liánhé huì	上海文学艺术界联合会
Shanghai Youth Art Association	Shànghǎi qīngnián měishù xiéhuì	上海青年美术会

Shanghai Youth Literature and Art Alliance	Shànghǎi qīngnián wényì liánméng	上海青年文艺联盟
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Art education institutions

Beijing Fine Art Academy	Běijīng huàyuàn	北京画院
Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA)	Zhōngyāng měishù xuéyuàn	中央美术学院
China Academy of Art (CAA)	Zhōngguó měishù xuéyuàn	中国美术学院
Chinese National Academy of Arts (formerly the Research Institute of Fine Art and the China Arts Research Academy)	Zhōngguó yìshù yán jiù yuàn měishù yán jiù yuàn	中国艺术研究院美术研究院
East China Normal University Department of Fine Art	Huádōng shīfàn dàxué měishù xì	华东师范大学美术系
People's Liberation Army Academy of Art	Zhōngguó rénmin Jiefangjun yishu xueyuan	中国人民解放军艺术学院
Shanghai Arts and Crafts College (SACC)	Shànghǎi gōngyì měishù xuéyuàn	上海工艺美术学院
Shanghai Chinese Painting Institute (SCAI)	Shànghǎi zhōngguó Huàyuàn	上海中国画院
Shanghai Fine Art College (SFAC)	Shànghǎi shì měishù zhuānkē xuéxiào	上海市美术专科学校
Shanghai Normal University	Shànghǎi shīfàn xuéyuàn	上海师范学院

Shanghai Oil Painting and Sculpture Institute (SOPSI)	Shànghǎi yóuhuà diāosù yuàn	上海油画雕塑院
Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA) also referred to as Shanghai Drama Institute and Shanghai Academy of Drama.	Shànghǎi xìjù xuéyuàn	上海戏剧学院
Shanghai University School of Art	Shànghǎi dàxué yìshù xuéyuàn	上海大学艺术学院
The Central Academy Of Drama	Zhōngyāng xìjù xuéyuàn	中央戏剧学院
Zhejiang Fine Art Academy China Academy of Art (CAA) (Current)	Zhèjiāng měishù xuéyuàn	浙江美术学院
Art galleries and museums		
National Art Museum of China NAMOC	Zhōngguó měishù guǎn	中国美术馆
Shanghai Art Exhibition Gallery (SAEG)	Shànghǎi měishù zhǎnlǎn guǎn	上海美术展览馆
Shanghai Art Museum	Shànghǎi měishù guǎn	上海美术馆
Shanghai Exhibition Centre	Shànghǎi zhǎnlǎn guǎn	上海展览中心
Shanghai Huangpu District Children's Palace	Shànghǎi huángpǔ qū shàoniángōng	上海黄浦区少年宫
Shanghai Museum	Shànghǎi bówùguǎn	上海博物馆
Art movements		
'85 Art New Wave movement	'85 Měishù xīncháo	'85 美术新潮
'85 Movement	'85 Měishù yùndòng	'85 美术运动

Avant-garde	Qiánwèi yìshù xiānfēng yìshù	前卫艺术 先锋艺术
Cultural Fever	Wénhuà rè	文化热
Grass Society	Cǎocǎo shè	草草社
Muse Society	Mó shè	摩社
Native Soil Art	Xiāngtǔ zìrán zhǔyìhuìhuà	乡土自然主义绘画
New Culture Movement	Xīn wénhuà yùndòng	新文化运动
New Zhe School of Figurative Painting	Xīn zhèpài rénwù huà	新浙派人物画
Pegasus Group	Tiānmǎ huì	天马会
Scar Art	Shānghén yìshù	伤痕艺术
Shanghai School Painting	Hǎipài huìhuà	海派绘画
Socialist realism	Shèhuì zhǔyì xiànshí zhǔyì	社会主义现实主义
Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art	Zài yán'ān wényì zuòtán huì shàng de jiǎnghuà	在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话
The Storm Society	Jué lán shè	决澜社
Western Style Painting Movement	Yánghuà yùndòng	洋画运动

Exhibitions

<i>Black Painting Exhibition</i>	Hēi huàzhǎn	《黑画展》
<i>China/Avant-garde Art Exhibition</i>	Zhōngguó xiàndài yìshù zhǎn	《中国现代艺术展》
<i>Concave-Convex Exhibition</i>	Āotú zhǎn	《凹凸展》
<i>M Conceptual Performance Exhibition</i>	M guānniàn yìshù biǎoyǎn zhǎn	《M 观念艺术表演展》
<i>Shanghai Art Museum's New Building Completion Exhibition (SAM's New Building Completion Exhibition)</i>	Shànghǎi měishù guǎn xīn guǎn chénglì zhǎn	《上海美术馆新馆成立展》
<i>Stars Exhibition</i>	Xīngxīng huàzhǎn	《星星画展》
<i>The Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983</i>	Bā sān nián jiēduàn huìhuà shíyàn zhǎnlǎn	《八三年阶段绘画实验展览》
<i>The Last Supper Exhibition</i>	Zuìhòu de wǎncān	《最后的晚餐》
<i>Twelve Persons Painting Exhibition</i>	Shí'èr rén huàzhǎn	《十二人画展》

Political campaigns and groups

Anti-Rightists Campaign	Fǎn yòupài yùndòng	反右派运动
Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign	Fǎnduì jīngshén wūrǎn	反对精神污染
Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalisation	Fǎnduì zīchǎn jiējí zìyóu huà de yùndòng	反对资产阶级自由化的运动
Chinese Communist Party (CCP)	Zhōngguó gòngchǎndǎng	中国共产党
Collective movement	Jítǐ yùndòng	集体运动

Democracy Wall Movement	Mínzhǔ qiáng yùndòng	民主墙运动
Gang of Four	Sì rén bāng	四人帮
Great Leap Forward	Dà yuèjìn	大跃进
June Fourth incident	Liù Sì shìjiàn	六.四事件
Literary Inquisition	Wénzì yù	文字狱
Mass movement	Qúnzhòng yùndòng	群众运动
May Fourth Movement	Wǔsì yùndòng	五四运动
Nationalist Party of China	Guómíndǎng Or Kuomintang	国民党
Re-education camp	Wǔqī gànxiào	五七干校
Reform and Opening-up policy	Gǎigé kāifàng zhèngcè	改革开放政策

Political slogans

“Bring Order out of Chaos”	Bōluàn fǎnzhèng	拨乱反正
“Connect to international standards”	Guójì Jiēguǐ	(国际)接轨
“Educated city youth to go down to the countryside”	Zhīshì qīngnián dào nóngcūn qù	知识青年到农村去
“Four Modernizations”	Sì gè xiàndàihuà	四个现代化
“Major disaster area”	Zhòng zāiqū	重灾区
“Political Rehabilitation”	Zhèngzhì píngfǎn	政治平反

“Sent up to the mountain and down to the countryside”	Shàngshān xià xiāng	上山下乡
“The Two Whatevers”	Liǎng gè fánshì	两个凡是
“Three Principles of the People: Nationalism, Democracy, Livelihood of the People”	Sānmín zhǔyì: Mínzú, mínquán, mínshēng	三民主义: 民族, 民 权, 民生

Publications and media

<i>Fine Arts in China</i>	Zhōngguó měishù bào	《中国美术报》
<i>Fine Art</i>	Měishù	《美术》
<i>Comic Magazine</i>	Liánhuánhuà bào	《连环画报》
<i>Jiangsu Pictorial Journal</i>	Jiāngsū huà kān	《江苏画刊》
<i>Liberation Daily</i>	Jiěfàng rìbào	《解放日报》
<i>Shanghai Xinmin Evening Newspaper</i>	Shànghǎi xīnmín wǎnbào	《上海新民晚报》
<i>Visual Art</i>	Shìjué yìshù	《视觉艺术》
<i>World Affairs</i>	Shìjiè zhī shí	《世界知识》
<i>Writer</i>	Zuòjiā	《作家》