MODERN ART IN SHANGHAI DURING THE 1990S

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Abstract

My thesis studies modern art in Shanghai during the 1990s, concentrating on the work of four of the more original and well-known artists, Yu Youhan, Ding Yi, Shi Yong, and Zhou Tiehai. In Chapter One, I briefly discuss the historical role that Shanghai played in the transplantation of Western-style oil painting to China in the later 19th-early 20th centuries, the first great Shanghai age of the 1920s and 1930s, the isolated and sterile period that followed after World War II, and the reopening of Shanghai to modern Western art practice during the late 1970s and 1980s. During the second of these periods, Shanghai's "Golden Age," I show that the debate between artists and critics who favored art for social purposes and those who advocated art for art's sake had already begun.

Chapter Two concentrates on the oil paintings of Yu Youhan and Ding Yi. Although Yu was one of the first creators of abstract, non-representational art in China, he is more famous for his later American Pop-art-influenced paintings incorporating iconography from the Cultural Revolution period, especially the image of Mao Zedong. Unlike the other artists I study, Yu was strongly influenced by Maoist ideology and has always maintained that art should be made for and reflect the lives of the Chinese people. On the other hand, his student Ding Yi, best known for his series of paintings based on the sign +, has created pure non-representational canvases that he hopes will be universal in their appeal and without political or cultural references.

Chapter Three treats Shi Yong and Zhou Tiehai, two multimedia artists. Shi began as an oil painter influenced by Chirico but soon moved onto installation art characterized by a seemingly Minimalist vocabulary and an emphasis on scientific accuracy. In recent years he has worked in a number of media,
including so-called "apartment art," performance, and computer technology. His latest works have been characterized by an ironic examination of the relationship between the West as the center of modern art and Chinese artists on the periphery. Zhou Tiehai, who started out as a painter of works superficially resembling the big character posters of the Cultural Revolution, has moved on to creations incorporating painting, video, performance, sound, and photography. He, too is interested in the relationship between China and the center and particularly in the tension between the artist's "spiritual" life and the commerce of art.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the four Shanghai artists within a broad context of the major issues confronting them, while touching briefly on some other important artists from the city. Some of the major trends in Shanghai art during this period made apparent by my discussion are: (1) an almost bewildering diversity in styles and interests, (2) a general tendency to avoid the overt and obvious political comment so typical of Beijing artists, (3) a genuine concern about the negative impact of commercialism on art and how to confront or adapt to it, and (4) witty and ironic discussion of the influence of Western hegemonism on the artists of Third World countries, rarely found in Chinese art created outside Shanghai.
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Chapter One Introduction: General Historical Background and the Vicissitudes of the "Shanghai Age"

It is often said that modern art was, more or less, a derivative of technological breakthroughs beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. New technology, machines, and the mass production of modern industry created metropolises, where modern Western art emerged, grew, and flourished as a product of urban wealth and sophistication. Even today, modern art still symbolizes a metropolitan existence characterized by dynamism, material comfort, cultural inclusiveness, shifting reality, and ruthless competition. Attributed to the desire, turmoil, and bewilderment of metropolitan people and to their eagerness for expression and self-assertion, modern art remains a necessity for many. Thus, it is no wonder that Paris before the Second World War and New York during the post-war period generated so many influential new Western art movements, and why Shanghai, once renowned as the "Paris of the East" during the first half of this century, became the birthplace of new art in twentieth century China.

As a result of the Opium War, Shanghai was made a treaty port in 1843 and became one of the few doors open to Western culture and technology in China. Free trade, the full introduction and utilization of Western industrial technology, as well as the rise of capitalism increased material comforts and

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1 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, New York, 1981, pp. 1-10 and H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art--Painting Sculpture Architecture Photography*, New York, 1986, pp. 23-30. Robert Hughes starts his book on the new art of the century with the chapter "The paradise of the machine," and Arnason launches his introduction to the history of modern painting with the chapter "The Invention of Photography and the Rise of Realism." The two scholars' methods of studying art history are quite different, with the former discussing its historical richness within the framework of his own subjective judgement, and the latter closely examining art works as historical facts. They, however, share the same insight into the importance of machinery to the birth of modern art.
economic prosperity in this young harbor city, which, in turn, attracted a huge population from other regions, thus, forming a new immigrant urban context and an open cultural environment. After 1845, various foreign concessions (zuijie 租界) were set up in the urban areas of Shanghai, where Westerners from over twenty countries dwelled in search of their fortunes. Shanghai became an international city, involved in a rapid process of urbanization and westernization. Confronted by miscellaneous imported cultures, Shanghai people, as the modern scholar Li Chao 李超 stated, "had no passive psychological obstacles to exclude or be introspective; but rather, they took the initiative to pander to, and to imitate these new imports in an extremely receptive manner."\(^2\)

It was with this kind of social mentality and background that Shanghai became the birthplace of modern art in China, where Western oil painting reached maturity, at least with regard to technique, in the first decades of this century. As some recent histories of modern Chinese art suggest, its most dynamic part centers on the history of oil painting. Moreover, before 1949 this history of Chinese oil painting can largely be represented by the history of oil painting in Shanghai. Thus, some discussion of how Western oil painting developed in Shanghai must necessarily preface my study of the new Shanghai art of the 1990s. This is all the more necessary because this recent art is a product of certain social conditions similar, but not identical, to those at the beginning of this century. Here, I would like to present this historical background by discussing the process by which Western oil painting was transplanted to Shanghai.

\(^2\) Li Chao 李超, *Shanghai youhua shi 上海油畫史*, Shanghai, 1995, p. 17. Li quotes several texts written at the end of the nineteenth century, which describe Western movies, instruments and costumes in detail, revealing the masses' curiosity, acceptance, and enjoyment of these foreign imports.
To begin with, the transplantation of Western oil painting was a visual revolution that began with the general population and was then adopted by the elite. Historical studies of Chinese art have demonstrated that the earliest Western oil painting in China was religious in nature. As early as the late Ming dynasty, both commoners and literati had been exposed to the realistic style of Western religious paintings and engravings, brought to China by Western missionaries. During the Qing dynasty, Western missionaries such as Giuseppe Castiglione 郎士寧 (1688-1766) and Ignatius Sichelbart 艾啓蒙 (1708-1780) served in the imperial court as prestigious official painters, teaching the techniques of Western oil painting to Chinese court artists, who were largely regarded as mere artisans by the high-minded Chinese literati. Influenced by the example of Western missionaries, a few Chinese literati painters of the late Ming and Qing periods, including both Wu Bin 吳彬 (1591-1626) and Wu Li 吳歈 (1632-1718), allowed Western perspective and realism to appear in a limited way in some of their own works. Nevertheless, the techniques of Western oil painting, considered "barbaric craftsmanship" (yiji 夷技) by Chinese literati artists, were never widely or openly accepted by the cultural elite and thus failed to exert a strong impact on Chinese painting. Furthermore, the ingrained visual tradition and exclusive cultural psychology supported and exemplified by the literati class also hindered the spread of Western oil painting in China even as a kind of craftsmanship. It was not until the beginning of the 1860s when the first Chinese workshop of Western art, the Tushanwan Painting School (Tushanwan huaguan 土山灣畫館), was established in a Catholic church in Shanghai, that the whole situation began to change.

3 See James Cahill, *The compelling image*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, pp. 1-35. In the chapter "Chang Bung, the Limits of Representation," Cahill gives a detailed discussion of the response of Chinese people, especially, literati painters, to Western realism in the late Ming dynasty and studies the influence of the Western realistic style on the evolution of Chinese painting.
In the Tushanwan workshop, hundreds of Chinese orphans, adopted by the church, learned various techniques of Western art, ranging from oil painting to glass painting, watercolor sketching, and photography, from highly skilled Western missionaries. Although the workshop was designed to promote Catholicism by producing works of art to be used as religious offerings, it was in fact the first art school in China that systematically imparted the techniques of Western art to a significant number of Chinese people. From the 1860s to the 1940s, generations of specialists in the techniques of Western art were trained by this workshop, and through these Shanghai artisans, Western oil painting, or more accurately, the Western realistic painting style, began to be imported wholesale into late nineteenth century China and quickly became an indispensable part of Shanghai popular culture. This school for craftsmen was established much earlier than the various Western art schools and academies set up in Shanghai by the new intellectuals during the first decade of the twentieth century and was the forerunner of the later artistic revolution inside China.

At the end of the nineteenth century, with foreign cultures and commodities pouring into China, the eagerness for things modern and Western became even stronger among Shanghai people. The fact that Western oil painting not only represented Western civilization but was also both visually and psychologically novel, qualities not to be found in most literati painting, quickly made it an indispensable part of Shanghai popular culture. From then on, the Western realistic painting style was widely used in the Shanghai mass media, which depicted worldly objects to satisfy the tastes of a wider range of people than before. Images of female beauties, set in architectural perspective and rendered in a highly realistic style, became the most popular subject matter, appearing commonly in calendars (yuefenpai 月份牌), advertisements, logos,
newspaper illustrations and comic books. Most of these images were meant to be sexually appealing, but some of them truly reflected the new spirit of a transitional age. In a newspaper illustration of 1916, we see such an image, a young Shanghai lady, dressed in a conservative Chinese-style costume, creating her self-portrait on a canvas, with brushes and a palette in her hands. The space and the surrounding objects were all well depicted with Western geometrical perspective. In a picture of this sort, the popularity of the new visual forms in Shanghai and their strong impact on the lives and aesthetics of the general population are quite striking.

It is worth mentioning that the birth and development of the publishing industry in Shanghai at the end of the nineteenth century also contributed greatly to the dissemination of Western visual forms in China. In 1876, the lithographic printing technique appeared in Shanghai, and in 1902, the techniques of zincography and copperplate printing were imported into China. Those new printing techniques provided an efficient but inexpensive way for Western visual styles to be introduced into Shanghai popular culture. From 1875, the Shanghai-published Children's Monthly Newspaper (Xiaohai yuebao 小孩月報) began to serialize articles entitled "Elementary Introduction to Painting" ("Lunhua Qianshuo 論繪畫淺說), providing the first public introduction to Western painting techniques in a plain language accessible to all. In 1884, the first Chinese news pictorial, Dianshizhai Pictorial (Dianshizhai huabao 碧石齋畫報), run by two British entrepreneurs, initiated the publication of Western-style pictures made by Chinese illustrators in Shanghai. These pictures not only presented a panorama of the social life at

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5 Li Chao, p. 38, il. 47.
6 To know more about the Dianshizhai huabao, see Julia Andrews, "Commercial art and China's modernization," in Julia Andrews and Kuiyi
the time, but also introduced "bizarre foreign activities" and new technological inventions to the Shanghai reading public. In the 1930s, the publication industry in Shanghai entered its golden period, adopting the most advanced printing techniques in the production of a vast number of newspapers and pictorials circulated in the streets of the city. No matter whether they were published for political or intellectual reasons or just for mass entertainment, pictures in the Western visual style were always a crucial component in Shanghai people's daily life.

Commercialism lent a strong impetus for the import of Western art to Shanghai. Even at the time of the Tushanwan Painting School, Western-style paintings produced by the artisans there were not merely religious offerings, for some historical records inform us that copies of European masterpieces were also produced by the workshop on the side and were then sold at good prices to Chinese and foreign collectors. Shortly after Shanghai became a treaty port, the booming economy gave rise to the first commercial Western-style painting in the city, the so-called "export painting" (waixiaohua 外銷畫), which originated in Macao and Hong Kong. These paintings, for the most part a product of Cantonese painters, depicted scenes of the Shanghai Bund, colonial dwellings, and local customs. Zhou Gua 周呱, one of the first recorded Chinese export painters, resided in Shanghai for twenty-five years, making a living by running a workshop. The "export paintings" represented a big leap in the

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8 By commercialism, I merely mean buying and selling art works, without regard to whether or not artists made them according to the orders of patrons.
9 Li Chao quotes a passage to this effect but does not give a source. Li Chao, p. 7.
10 According to the catalogue of an exhibition of this painting genre, held in the Hong Kong Art Museum in 1987 and entitled The Scenery of the Treaty Ports in the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries (Shiba
importation of Western-style painting style, when compared to the religious paintings and the copies of European masterpieces made by the artisans of the Tushanwan workshop. The narrow tastes of collectors and the needs of the market might have limited the individual creativity of "export painters," but the existence of a local market, largely comprised of resident foreigners, encouraged painters to employ foreign techniques with greater flexibility and richness of subject matter.

We can even discern the impact of commercialism on the practice of the so-called Shanghai School (Haipai 海派) of Chinese ink painting, which is noted for its efforts to reform the genre by introducing Western visual elements during the second half of the nineteenth century. The masters of the Shanghai School, such as the three Ren Brothers (Ren Yi 任颐 [1840-1896], Ren Xiong 任熊 [1822-1857] and Ren Xun 任薰 [1835-1893]), Xu Gu 盧谷 (1824-1896), and Wu Changshuo 吳昌碩 (1844-1927), came from more cultivated backgrounds and worked on more sophisticated cultural levels than the artisans of the Tushanwan workshop or those of the "export painting." However, the highmindedness of the literati tradition did not prevent them from moving to Shanghai, very likely in search of a better art market.11 Furthermore, their

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11 Although the myth of the highmindedness of Chinese literatus-painters has already been deconstructed by James Cahill in his book, The painter's practice, New York, 1994, we still assume that a "real" scholar-artist would deal with material life in a very elegant and indirect way, and that a "real" literatus-painter is not supposed to search for a market openly or let the market influence the direction of his artistic practice. However, the masters of the Shanghai School all moved to Shanghai and lived by selling their paintings. Although Xu Gu, became a monk when the Taipings rebelled, he moved back and forth between Yangzhou and Shanghai, the most prosperous commercial cities of his era. Later, he opened a shop to sell his paintings in the Temple of the City God (Chenghuangmiao 城隍廟) in Shanghai, the urban center at that time. Ding Xiyuan 丁羲元, Xu Gu yanjiu 盧谷研究, Tianjing, 1987, pp. 12-3, 60, 75.
reform of ink painting made their art "suit both the refined and popular tastes" (yasu gongshang 雅俗共賞), thus, creating a larger audience for their works.12

As I have suggested above, commercialism made an important contribution to the transplantation of Western painting styles to Shanghai on the popular level. Even the elite circle of modern Chinese artists, who emerged during the first decade of the twentieth century in Shanghai were never openly opposed to selling their works. The first generation of Chinese oil painting masters of this century, such as Yan Wenliang (1893-1990), Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Liu Haisu (1896-1994), and Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) have left behind a body of written documents dealing with various issues of Western oil painting, ranging from its technique and materials to its social and aesthetic functions in the Chinese context, but they hardly commented on the relationship between art and money.13

Some scholars, such as Ralph Croizier and Julia Andrews, argued that there was scarcely a market for oil painting at that time, Andrews stating that oil painting in China "flourished as an academic rather than a commercial endeavor."14 Margaret Kao even suggested that "the economic factor might very well have influenced many Western-style artists to return to traditional painting, which catered to a fairly stable public."15 Nevertheless, some

13 Ralph Croizier, "Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the fate of modernism in Republican China," in John Clark ed., Modernity in Asian art, Sydney, 1993, p. 142. Croizier's research showed that artists like Ni Yide 倪贻德 were concerned with this problem. In 1928, Ni published a collection of his essays, Yishu mantan 藝術漫談, in Shanghai. One of the articles in this book discussed the question of the livelihood of the artist. However, this seems to be a very rare example.
sources can suggest that many of these leading artists did commonly sell their creations, though these may have been mainly brush paintings. During the war period (1937-1945), the Daxin Company Gallery, located on the fourth floor of the Daxin Department Store (one of the four biggest companies in Shanghai at that time, now called the First Shanghai Department Store and still one of the largest department stores in the downtown area of Shanghai), became a very important space to show, and probably to sell, the Western-style works of the leading artists, Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, Chen Baoyi 陈抱一 (1893-1945), and Guan Liang 關良 (1900-1986).

In short, in a highly commercialized urban context like Shanghai, issues related to commercialism were hardly treated by the leading artists of the age in their writings, not to mention their visual products. This omission was probably due in part to their relatively high social status and their continued allegiance to the myth of the literati tradition of amateurism. Here, I do not intend to do more than mention this phenomenon, but we will say that it contrasts vividly with the Shanghai artistic practice of the 1990s.

According to some sources, as early as 1902 Western-style drawing was already compulsory in the Chinese education system, and a few Chinese artists such as Zhou Xiang 周湘 (1871-1933) and Li Shutong 李叔同 (1880-1942) went

16 For example, Xu Beihong sold his paintings from time to time in order to survive during his youth and to pay maintenance to his ex-wife, Jiang Biwei, in later years. Liao Jingwen 廖靜文, Xu Beihong yisheng 徐悲鴻一生, Beijing, 1984 (first ed. 1982), pp. 268-80. Jiang Biwei 蒋碧薇, Shengsi zhi lian-Jiang Biwei huiyilu 生死之戀--蔣碧薇回憶錄, Nanjing, 1988, pp. 3, 12, 432-3, and Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, pp. 169-180. Although Liu Haisu was born into a rich family and was supported by his father when he ran his art school in Shanghai, he still set a high price for his experimental art, about ten times that of the most expensive Chinese ink painting of the age. Shi Nan 石楠, Liu Haisu zhuan 劉海粟傳, Heilongjiang, 1996, p. 80.

17 All of these artists held exhibitions in the gallery, but, unfortunately, we have no precise information about whom they sold their works to or what prices they received. Li Chao, pp. 98-101.
abroad to study Western art around that time.18 However, it was not until the
decade after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 that the transplantation of
Western art along with other elements of modern Western culture was carried
out comprehensively in Chinese elite and official circles. In 1912 Cai Yuanpei
蔡元培 (1868-1940) became the first Minister of Education of Republican China,
and shortly afterward he made a new plan for the national education system,
giving aesthetic education a more prominent position than before.19 In 1917,
Cai went further by advocating the idea of "taking aesthetic education as a
substitute for religion" (yi meiyu dai zongjiao shuo 以美育代宗教說) as a way to
create a harmonious life and society. In art education, Cai emphasized the
importance of synthesizing the scientific approach of Western realist art with
the aesthetic methods of traditional Chinese painting. During the same period,
leading intellectuals such as Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929), Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1880-1942), and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) also called for importation of
Western art as a new cultural and aesthetic form aimed at transforming China
into a modern country.

The theories of these leading intellectuals had a strong impact on the
educated youth of the age. At that time, the importation of Western art
techniques and approaches into the educational system was a bold gesture of
anti-traditionalism. Benefiting from its economic power, geographic location,
and open cultural atmosphere, Shanghai became the intellectual front of the
new Chinese art movement, usually known as the "Western Painting Movement"
(yanghua yundong 洋畫運動).

In 1912, Liu Haisu, along with other artists, established the first formal
Western art school in China, the Shanghai Painting School (Shanghai

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18 Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, pp. 19-21, 31, 35. Michael Sullivan,
pp. 27-30.
19 Ibid., p. 32.
tuhuayuan 上海圖畫院). This school not only initiated professional exhibitions of water color and oil painting in China, but also employed live models for nude drawing in the teaching process as early as 1914. Three years later, Liu Haisu and his art school infuriated the conservative social authorities by showing the students' drawings of live nude models publicly for the first time ever in China. The heated debate over this so-called moral issue and the fight of Liu Haisu and his supporters with the conservatives lasted almost one decade. However, by the middle of the 1920s, drawings of live nudes were victorious and became commonplace in the numerous art schools in Shanghai. 20

In the 1910s, the movement of going abroad to study Western culture and science also reached its climax among Chinese youth. Almost all the first generation Chinese oil painting masters left Shanghai for Europe or Japan to study Western art. Due to its metropolitan atmosphere, its relatively stable political environment, and the rich cultural heritage in its surrounding regions, Shanghai became their common base after they finished studies abroad, frequently returning full of ideas for constructing a new country. Thus, it is hardly surprising that during the 1920s and the 1930s, the so-called "Shanghai Age" (Shanghai shidai 上海時代) in Chinese history, Shanghai served as the exclusive centre for modern Chinese art. 21 Numerous Western painting associations, schools, and institutions were established there, and its art circles experimented with a wide variety of modern Western painting styles, ranging from Neo-classicism to Cubism.

Nevertheless, the transplantation of Western art to Shanghai involved much more than the establishment of schools and the opening of exhibitions, for there still was the problem of how to activate the imported visual and

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21 Li Chao, p. 54.
aesthetic forms in the domestic social and cultural context, rather than engaging in a mere mechanical imitation of foreign painting techniques. The first generation of Chinese oil painters adopted various techniques to achieve this purpose, but no matter how much these varied from one artist to another, the painters' artistic concerns and practices can be reduced to two major approaches: making art for social-political purposes, or making art mainly for art's sake. Before 1937, these two opposing tendencies were manifested in the confrontation between artists who preferred realism and those who favored such styles as Impressionism, Expressionism, or Cubism in their canvases.

Xu Beihong was the most influential advocate and practitioner among those who promoted realism, and even today his painting style is considered the mainstream in Chinese art academies. Although he studied art in Paris during the period when Western painting was developing in new directions, Xu chose realism as the best means to pursue truth in Chinese art and society. For him, the stereotyped formats of old Chinese painting, and particularly its depiction of the images in the painter's mind, as opposed to objective studies of life, made it a dead-end art form, and the objective and accurate representation of nature and society became the exclusive aim and meaning of art. In his own paintings, Xu often employed a realistic style to depict historical events with the intent of awakening the masses to their social responsibilities. After he came back to China, Xu was mainly involved in utilizing Western realism to reform Chinese ink painting. Verisimilitude thus became the key to his art teaching, while

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22 Ibid., pp. 506-16. Section 2 of Chapter Five, "The Debate between Art for Art's Sake and Art for Life and for the Masses' Sake" demonstrates that this debate centered on the main issue concerning Chinese art circles before 1949. It also examines how the issue was raised by Chinese artists as early as the 1920s and became the focus of a heated debate involving art critics and painters during the 1930s. See also Yan Tingsong, "Lun 'huo' yu 'buhuo'--1929 guanyu xifang xian dai yishu de yichang lunzheng" 論“感”與 “不感”--1929年關於西方現代藝術的一場論爭, Yiyuan 藝苑, 4 (1993), pp. 47-50.
Expressionism, along with other new artistic styles, became the principal target of his attack.

In 1929, when the first national art exhibition of Republican China was held in Shanghai, this debate came to a head in a famous exchange between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1896-1931), a renowned modern Chinese poet and influential critic of Western art. Xu Beihong refused to take part in the exhibition, because it presented some works influenced by Western Modernism. To justify his decision, he published an article, entitled "Confusion" ("Huo" 惑), violently attacking modern Western art in general, and specifically the works of such famous Western Impressionists and Post-Impressionists as Renoir, Cézanne, and Matisse, since in his opinion they had failed to serve society by reflecting it in a realistic way. He also denounced Liu Haisu and his art school for their art practice and teaching methods, all of which followed the Western Modernists.

Disagreeing with Xu Beihong's ideas, Xu Zhimo wrote a public letter to the former, entitled "I Am Confused, Too" ("Wo ye huo" 我也惑). In this document, Xu Zhimo criticized Xu Beihong's emotional approach to art criticism and stated that art criticism should be independent from moral concerns. More importantly, Xu Zhimo reinforced his theory of art for art's sake by pointing out that mere craftsmanship was inadequate to realize great art works. He emphasized that the value of a work of art does not lie in its verisimilitude, but...


in the unique and untrammeled feelings expressed by the artist. In short, for Xu Zhimo, art was not just a tool designed to reflect or to serve society, but rather a way of living, expressing, and inventing with complete autonomy.

The famous debate between the two Xus also attracted the participation of another established realist, Li Yishi 李毅士 (1886-1942). Li immediately responded with his article "I Am Not Confused" ("Wo bu huo" 我不惑) in support of Xu Beihong's ideas. Though taking a more moderate position than Xu Beihong, he made the social and political function of Chinese art even clearer by stating that Chinese artists should "use the power of art to adjust people's thoughts and to console their spirits" after two decades of social turmoil. In his pragmatic mind, modern Western art should not prevail in China, not because of its lack of artistic quality, but rather because it was not good for the stability of Chinese society and was not understood by the masses.

As Ralph Croizier pointed out in his essay, behind this well-known debate on the artistic style for Chinese modernism "loomed large issues about the nature of art, the role of artists, and the meaning of modernity." In Xu Beihong and Li Yishi's statements, we hear a strong advocate of the idea of art for society, a position shared by many Chinese intellectuals of the time. On the other hand, Xu Zhimo was not totally isolated, for in the practices of such first-generation Chinese oil painting artists as Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian, the influence of his approach was obvious, both artists experimenting with a wide range of Western styles influenced by Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism. Liu

25 Ibid.
26 Li Yishi 李毅士, "Wo bu huo" 我不惑, in Li Chao, p. 61 and Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, p. 495. See also the discussion in Yan Tingsong, p. 49. According to Ralph Croizier, the original one was published in Meizhan huikan, No.8 (May 1, 1929), pp. 1-2. Ralph Croizier, "Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai," p. 136.
27 Ibid.
28 In Ralph Croizier's research, we find a detailed discussion of the famous debate between the two Xus, in which Li Yishi also participated. Ibid., pp. 135-6.
Haisu was especially famous for his emphasis on the free expression of individuality and personal feelings in both his art practice and teaching. Although Lin Fengmian’s early theory promoted the idea of art serving the masses, during the later 1920s his personal practice inclined more to pure artistic experiment, namely, devoting himself to synthesizing the new Western visual elements with the aestheticism of traditional Chinese painting. Unlike Xu Beihong, both Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu were consciously involved in studies of visual elements such as color, form, brushstroke, and structure, putting more effort into establishing personal signatures in their art rather than using it to reflect the social and political realities of contemporary China.

In 1932, Pang Xunqin (1906-1985), Ni Yide (1901-1970), together with some other young artists, established the Storm Society (Juelanshe) in Shanghai. They strongly advocated the idea of oil painting as an autonomous art form to be used for free expression, thus, pushing the ontological practice of new Western art movements to a new extreme for that period. In their manifesto, the young artists stated:

We recognize that art is neither the imitation of nature, nor the rigid repetition of any stereotype. We want to devote our lives to expressing our bold and creative spirit without disguise.

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29 In 1927 and 1928, respectively, Lin Fengmian was actively involved in organizing the Beijing Art Conference (Beijing Yishu Dahui) and the Art Movement Society (Yishu yundong she) in Hangzhou. He promoted the idea of creating art which could be appreciated by the majority of Chinese people. Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, pp. 254, 509-510. Lin Fengmian 林風眠, "Zhi quanguo yishujie shu" 致全國藝術界書, in Lin Fengmian, Zhongguo huihua xinlun 中國繪畫新論, Hong Kong, 1974, repr. of Yishu conglin 藝術叢論, Beijing, 1946, pp. 17-45.

30 For more detailed information about the history and activities of the Storm Society, see Ralph Croizier, "Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai," pp. 135-153.
We think that art is neither the slave of religion, nor the interpretation of literature. We want to construct a pure world of structures in a free and synthetic way. We abominate any old form or color, and any mediocre, low craftsmanship. We want to employ new techniques to express the spirit of the new age...31

The bold manifesto of these artists was inspired by the modernistic insight of new Western art movements, and, similar to Western artists since the time of the Impressionists, the Storm Society proclaimed a separation of art from literature and religion. In their practice, leading artists of this school, such as Pang Xunqin, Ni Yide and Yang Taiyang 阳太陽 (1909-), studied, appropriated and synthesized various Western styles ranging from Post-Impressionism to Surrealism. This modernistic movement was constantly disrupted by the turmoil of China's civil wars and came to an end shortly before the eruption of the Second World War. When confronted with this national crisis, it proved incapable of overturning the view of art most current since the May Fourth Movement, namely, the identification of realism with the ideal of social involvement. However, the Storm Society represented the first group effort in pursuit of the ontological practice of modern Western art in twentieth century China.

Before the 1980s, there was only one group in China that can possibly be seen as the successor of the Storm Society in modernistic practice, namely, the Chinese Independent Artists Association (Zhongguo Duli Meishu Xiehui 中國獨立美術協會), "originally formed in 1933 by a group of Cantonese students in Tokyo who transferred it to Canton after returning home."32 In 1935, the

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31 Ni Yide wrote "Juelanshe xuanyan" 决澜社宣言, originally published in Yishu xunkan 藝術旬刊, No.5 (October, 1932), p. 8. It is also found in Yuan Yunyi 袁錫宜, Pang Xunqin zhuan 阳敦情傳, Beijing, 1995, pp. 73-4; Li Chao, p. 70 and Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, p. 304.

members of this group organized a "well-publicized exhibition" of Surrealist art in Shanghai and soon afterwards "retreated to Canton" to continue with their modernistic practice.33

Based on what has been said above, some might conclude that in the 1920s and the 1930s, the practice of new art forms in Shanghai was either inspired by a sense of social responsibility or by art for its own sake. However, the former usually took priority over the latter. Artists at that time commonly participated in art groups and associations, trying to achieve their ideals of social and cultural revitalization though collective efforts, and from 1911 to 1949, hundreds of groups and associations of Western art were established in China, most of them, in Shanghai. Among them, the Orient Painting Society (Dongfang Huahui 東方畫會), organized by Wang Yacheng 汪亞乘 (1894-1983), Chen Baoyi, and Guan Liang (1915, Shanghai), the Heavenly Horse Association (Tianmahui 天馬會), started by Liu Haisu (1919, Shanghai), the Art Movement Society (Yishu Yundongshe 藝術運動社), initiated by Lin Fengmian and Dong Xiwen 董希文 (1929, Hangzhou or Shanghai), and the Silent Society (Mo She 默社), organized by Xu Beihong and Yan Wenliang 颜文梁 (1893-1990) (1936, Shanghai) all played crucial roles in the transplantation of Western art to China and to the revitalization of the domestic art scene.

These pioneers of modern Chinese art were all committed to the course of art education influenced by Cai Yuanpei's call for realizing national salvation through the cultivation of art. Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian, Pang Xunqin, and Ni Yide, as well as many other first generation Chinese oil painting masters, became important art mentors in twentieth century China by disseminating their ideas and techniques in the classroom, initiating and compiling pedagogical materials, and more importantly, through their theoretical writings.

33 Ibid.
and publications. Therefore, no matter how individualized their artistic practices were, their full commitment to art education and the great impact they created on later generations established them as social figures who were not isolated in the ivory tower of art but closely tied to shared social responsibilities. Even in the Storm Society, the most extreme proponents of art's autonomy before the 1980s, we can discern social and ideological components to their call to overthrow the old aesthetic and visual experiences and, thus, reform society, at least on the cultural level.

From the outbreak of World War II in 1937, the utilitarian function of art, especially the political use of art in the war effort against Japanese invasion, became central in Chinese art circles. In Nationalist-held territories, many artists dedicated their modern art practice to mass instruction in response to Lu Xun's promotion of art for society and revolutionary struggle. Before 1937, paintings, woodblock prints, and picture story-books, reflecting life during wartime and social problems in a realistic style, had already become the mainstream. In the 1940s, the general inclination to politicize art and the fact that the unstable political situation and the devastation of war forced many art schools and institutions to leave Shanghai for the interior further limited the vitality of modern Chinese art practice. Although Shanghai remained the most prosperous city and an important intellectual centre in China during that decade, the Civil War and the predominance of Left-Wing art brought the brilliant "Shanghai Age" to an end. When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, Beijing was selected as the capital of the New China, and the political and cultural centre of China accordingly moved north. Soon after Liberation,
the new government further dispersed the remaining art forces of Shanghai by realigning art academies on a national scale. The fact that there was no national-level art academy left in Shanghai in the early 1950s indicates that the previous centre of modern Chinese art had lost its former prestigious position.

During the regime of Mao Zedong, art practice in China was deprived of most of its autonomy and richness, serving merely as a tool for political propaganda. As early as 1942, Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" ("Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotan hui shang di jianghua" 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲活) stipulated the direction for the further development of art, insisting that art should serve the masses and the revolutionary effort, and that artists should equip themselves with Marxist-Leninist ideology. After Liberation, Mao's ideas were upheld as the national policy for artistic and literary practice and criticism in China. The subjectivity and creativity of artists were diminished and strictly subordinated to the political necessity of promoting the Communist Party's ideology. Art in Shanghai inevitably suffered the same fate.

After the early 1950s, communication between the Shanghai art community and the Western modern art world was completely severed. Many members of the art elite were sent to the countryside or factories to engage in the "reeducation process." Although during the first part of that decade, some Shanghai-based-artists, such as Lin Fengmian, Liu Haisu, Wu Dayu 吴大羽(1903-88), and Zhu Qizhan 朱屺瞻(1892-) retained a certain amount of freedom in depicting limited subject matters in oil painting, they were all purged during the later period of ideological campaigns. From the early fifties, Socialist

35 Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotan hui shang di jianghua" 在延安文艺座谈会上的講活, in Mao Zedong, Mao Zedong xuanji 毛泽东全集, Beijing, 1964, pp. 849-880.
Realism, newly imported from the Soviet Union, became the dominant artistic approach promoted by art institutions in China.

During the following two decades, especially during the period of the so-called Cultural Revolution, oil painting in Shanghai, as in other parts of China, reached a nadir, becoming moribund in both stylistic exploration and artistic concepts. Art schools were paralyzed; many artists were dismissed from their positions, exiled and generally persecuted. The subject matter of painting became narrower than ever, the nude, still-life and landscape being downplayed or excluded altogether. The principles of Socialist Realism were employed to produce monotonous pictures, either eulogizing the party's policy or giving a fictional account of the new socialist country. Images of the Party's deified leaders, confident labor heroes, and happy minorities took over completely in the oil paintings of those two decades. For contemporary viewers, their highly realistic format presents a portrait of exaggerated political passion and twisted truth. However, the art of the Maoist regime is still very much a part of contemporary Chinese artists' education and ideological memory. We will notice in later chapters that some Shanghai artists are consciously revitalizing the most mechanical formulae of the art of that period with their personal touches, trying to deliver new messages in the current social context.

After the Cultural Revolution, art in China started to revive quickly. Although realism continued to be upheld as the exclusive form allowed in art institutions and academies, works emphasizing humanism, which had been smothered by the blind political passions of the Maoist regime's art, mushroomed and immediately caught people's attention. Cheng Conglin's 程巖林 (b. 1954) Snow 1968 (Xue yi jiu liu ba 雪 1968) (1979) and Luo Zhongli's 羅中立 (b. 1948) Father (Fuqin 父親) (1981) may serve as the best examples which
use the realistic technique to repudiate Socialist Realism. In Yuan Yunsheng's mural painting, executed in 1979 on the wall of the newly constructed Beijing International airport, one also glimpses a bright vision, constructed out of line, color and decorative figures. Besides containing a female nude, which caused controversy and was finally covered up, this mural painting revealed the first sign of realism giving way to aestheticism in the public consciousness after the Cultural Revolution.

From the very beginning of the 1980s, with Deng Xiaoping at the helm, China set a course of pragmatic reforms aimed at economic reconstruction and very soon began to open up to the West. The publication of books on modern Western art, literature, and philosophy immediately had a strong impact on the Chinese art scene. A vigorous revival of modern art practice could be seen for the first time in China since Liberation. In November 1979, the Stars Group (Xingxing huahui 星星畫會), the first non-official art group since 1949, put on its first exhibition in Beijing, and its bold allegiance to modern Western artistic practice made a stir in the Chinese public and art circles. By the middle of the 1980s, with the maturity of other important art groups, such as New Carving (Xinkedu 新刻度) in Beijing and Xiamen Dada 廈門達達 in Fujian, all of which actively experimented with various new artistic media and concepts, what Chinese art historians call the "New Tide Art Movement of '85" (Bawu xinchao meishu 八五新潮美術) came into being. Meng Luding's 孟祿丁 and Zhang Qun's 張群 famous oil painting, In the New Era—the Revelation of Adam and Eve (Zai xin shidai—Yadang Xiawa di qishi 在新時代--亞當夏娃的啟示) (1984), made concrete the spirit of a new age, that is, the bold pursuit of rationalism, Western

37 Ibid., color plate 4.
civilization, and new artistic freedom. Within the same period, major art journals, such as *The Trend of Artistic Thought* (*Yishu sichao* 藝術思潮) (Wuhan) and *Report on Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao* 中國美術報) (Beijing), were published, introducing the art of Western Modernism and covering debates on diverse artistic issues. In the middle 1980s when a free market economy began to develop parallel to the autocratic control of the Communist government over the central economy and ideology, a claim to free artistic expression and a serious pursuit of modernism through visual forms demonstrated the common ideal shared by Chinese avant-garde artists at that time, that is, to push Chinese society forward on its course of democratization and modernization. The strong sense of social responsibility manifested by these artists of the 1980s closely resembled that of the modern art movement of the twenties and thirties.

In Shanghai art circles, the second transplantation of modern Western art also became the task of many artists, since Shanghai was one of the first cities to be reopened to the West. As early as 1978, a year after Deng Xiaoping came to power, the Shanghai Exhibition Hall welcomed the first Western art exhibition since the Cultural Revolution, the Exhibition of French Rural Paintings of the Nineteenth Century (*Faguo shijiu shiji nongcun fengjing huazhan* 法國十九世紀農村風景畫展). After decades of isolation, Shanghai artists once again enjoyed the humanity and refined techniques of original Western art works, rather than those of the sterile Socialist Realism.

A quick response to this Western influence was the 1979 Exhibition of the Shanghai Twelve (*Shanghai shi'erren huazhan* 上海十二人畫展). In the February of that year, twelve Shanghai artists spontaneously organized this exhibition in the Children's Palace of the Huangpu District (*Huangpu qu*...
shaonian gong (少年宫). It featured over one hundred fifty art works by these twelve artists, ranging from oil on canvas to brush paintings and to water colors, displaying a great variety of subject matter and style.\(^{39}\) In the exhibition preface, these artists claimed that: "Every artist has the right to choose the form of expression for his artistic creation."\(^{40}\) Their works were characterized by the styles of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and even Expressionism.\(^{41}\) Being nine months earlier than the first group show of the Stars Group, this exhibition is considered the first modernistic show in China after Liberation.\(^{42}\) In the same month, the Spring Festival Exhibition (Yingchun huazhan 迎春畫展), organized by the Shanghai Oil Painting Institute, was also held in the city. The sculpture *Scar* (*Shanghen* 傷痕), featured in this show, was the first nude exhibited in China since the 1970s.\(^{43}\)

From 1978 to 1982, foreign exhibitions were frequently seen in Shanghai, resuming the connection with the outside world that had been lost for decades. The most influential foreign exhibition during that period showed Minimalist and Abstract Expressionist paintings from the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the Shanghai Art Museum in the autumn of 1981. During my interviews with Shanghai artists, I discovered that many of them still have a vivid memory of that exhibition and admit the great impact and excitement created by Jackson Pollock's compelling canvas shown in it. After that, exhibitions of even more experimental paintings by Chinese artists appeared in Shanghai.\(^{44}\) The '83 Experimental Painting Exhibition (Basan

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40 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Those exhibitions include the '83 Experimental Painting Exhibition (1983, Fudan University), the Exhibition of New Representational Paintings (Xin juxiang huazhan 新具像畫展) (1985, Shanghai Jing'an
The first show of abstract painting in China since the Cultural Revolution was the Jeduan Shiyan Huihua Zhan (Fudan University, 1983). The experiments of participating artists such as Li Shan (b. 1942), Yu Xiaofu (b. 1950), and Zhang Jianjun (b. 1955) with pure visual elements caught people's attention, but their works were also criticized in the media for their divorce from the aesthetic demands of the masses. However, the conservatives failed to impede the development of the new. Two years later, Yu Youhan (b. 1943) organized the Exhibition of the Six Modernists (Xiandai Huihua Liuren Zhan) (Fudan University), showing eleven abstract paintings, made by himself and five of his students, including Ding Yi (b. 1962) and Qin Yifeng (b. 1961). In the 1990s, Yu Youhan, Ding Yi, and Qin Yifeng still play the role of experimental painters in the contemporary Shanghai art scene, the latter two distinguished by their obsession with the abstract rendition of visual elements developed by them in the eighties.

From the late 1980s onward, Western art influences also led Shanghai artists to go beyond the sphere of painting, and performance and installation works were shown occasionally, 1986 being a very active year in this respect. In the month of October, three art students from the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Ding Yi, Qin Yifeng, and Zhang Guoliang wrapped themselves in

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45 Huang Ke 黄可, "Chouxiang Hua, Xin Xingshi He Guoqing" (Chouxiang Hua, Xin Xingshi He Guoqing), Jiefang Ribao, December 6, 1983, p. 4.
yellow cloths and created performances in natural settings and also on the busy Shanghai streets. As Fan Dian, an art critic and historian, commented, their brave actions "embodied a positive power in forcing the viewer to accept the new."47

One month later, sixteen artists put on the 86 Concave and Convex Exhibition (Baliu ao tu zhan 86 凹凸展) in the Cultural Center of the Xuhui District (Xuhui qu wenhua guan 徐匯區文化館) in Shanghai. Consisting of sculpture, wall painting, ready-made objects, and symbolic signs around the showing space, this exhibition was labeled a "confusing show" (lingren feijie de zhanlan 令人費解的展覽) by the popular media in Shanghai but attracted many curious viewers. During the opening a group of young artists created spontaneous performances and conceptual art, making this "confusing" exhibition even more controversial. As one organizer of the show commented, "there has never been any exhibition in Shanghai with such a tremendous public response and with so many viewers, and there has never been one the works of which were damaged so badly by people, and which had so many anonymous artists taking part in its realization."49

Shortly after this controversial exhibition, the Shanghai audience saw "the most radical performance show since the 'New Tide Art Movement of '85'".50 It was the "M Art Group" Performance Exhibition ("M 藝術團" 表演藝術展), held in the theater of the Shanghai Workers' Cultural Palace (Shanghai gongren wenhua gong juchang 上海工人文化宮劇場) in December of 1986. Sixteen artists, including Song Haidong 宋海冬 (b. 1958), Yang Dongbai 杨冬白 (b. 1959),

46 Qu Qian 柴千, "Budiao, yici yishu he ziwo diao xian "布雕,一次藝術和自我的表現, Qingnian yidai 青年一代, 49.3 (March, 1987), p. 11.
49 Ibid., p. 179.
50 Ibid., p. 384.
Tang Guangming, a poet, and some young art students such as Zhou Tiehai (b. 1966) and Yang Xu (b. 1967) created performances on the stage, with about two hundred of their viewers participating spontaneously. In this approximately one-and-a-half-hour long exhibition, the violence of some of the performances startled the viewers. Fire, blood, torture, destruction, and struggle characterized these works, which not only manifested the artists' untrammeled rebellion against social conventions and restraints, but also revealed their "pressure, pain and anxiety deep inside their hearts."\(^{51}\)

Two years later, performance art was even seen in the most important official art venue of Shanghai, the Shanghai Art Gallery. As part of the Second Concave and Convex Show--The Last Supper (Di'erjie ao tu zhan--Zuihou diyawan can 第二届凹凸展--最后的晚餐), which was held there, the excited audience witnessed ten artists, including Li Shan, Song Haidong, Sun Liang (b. 1957), Li Xianting (b. 1949) (Beijing), and Wu Liang, engage in their so-called Wrapping Performance (Baozha zaoxing xingwei 包扎造型行为).\(^{52}\) In this piece, the artists, whose bodies were wrapped with white clothes, sat in a box-like enclosed space and engaged in Dadaist dialogues.\(^{53}\) Although the whole exhibition was shut down in the name of fire prevention by the authorities shortly after its opening, its experimental nature and its discussion of the emergence of commercialism and growing skepticism about socialist ideology and beliefs, made it a bold, if immature, gesture in contemporary Shanghai art history.

As my following study of four Shanghai artists will prove, during the 1980s artists of that city were no less committed to experiments in new art forms

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\(^{51}\) To know more about the M Art Group Performance exhibition, see ibid., pp. 384-7.

\(^{52}\) Fan Dian and Hou Hanru, p. 14.

\(^{53}\) For example: "Where is Godot?" "Godot went to do business." My interview with Li Shan in his studio on June 22, 1998.
and concepts than those in Beijing and other major sites of the "New Tide Art Movement," but, unfortunately, their contributions are not well known. One reason for this neglect is that there were no national-level art academies in Shanghai, but perhaps even more important is the fact that Shanghai artists did not generally work in groups, which would have attracted the attention of the popular media, art historians, and audiences. The only exception was the M Art Group which was formed in 1986 and disbanded shortly afterwards. Most Shanghai artists were engaged in individual studies of modern Western art itself, trying to develop personal styles through quasi-scholarly research on new art forms and concepts. By refusing to form art groups, which tend to place more emphasis on collective statement, more often than not political statement, Shanghai artists demonstrated an individualized and non-political approach to art making. This attitude continues in the 1990s, endowing contemporary Shanghai art practice with its own special qualities.

In February 1989, with the opening of the exhibition "China/Avant-garde" in the Beijing's National Gallery, the most prestigious official gallery in China, the contemporary Chinese art movement of the 1980s reached its climax. About ten Shanghai artists including Song Haidong, Li Shan, Sun Liang, Zhang Jianjun, Ding Yi, Zhou Changjiang (b. 1950), and Xu Hong participated in this exhibition. Three years in preparation, the exhibition was considered "an enormous victory of independent artists over the official art world," presenting about 300 works by most important independent artists and groups active between 1985 and 1987. Although there was inevitably much imitation of Western originals, the significant fact is that most of the works, ranging from oil painting and sculpture to photo-based art, installation, and performance, possessed a strong sense of ideological revolt. Wang Deren's

仁 (Fujian) act of throwing condoms and coins at the viewers, Wu Shanzhuan's 吳山專 (Zhejiang) selling fish inside the gallery, and Li Shan's performance of washing his feet for two hours definitely violated normal public expectations for art in China. Soon after, the entire exhibition was shut down by police as a result of the female art student, Xiao Lu's 肖魯 (Zhejiang) unexpectedly shooting at her installation with a real gun. By creating a great tension between their radical actions and the public, these artists tested the regime's limits on freedom, while at the same time transforming this whole exhibition into a media event.\textsuperscript{55} However, in this historical event in which rebellious spirit was obviously mixed with opportunistic motivation, most of the Shanghai artists took the role of viewers rather than participants. Were they trying to be indifferent, or rather sensible?

Despite the immaturity of the Chinese contemporary art movement during the later eighties, partly reflected in the common interest in creating shocking effects, social responsibility, seriousness and idealism were its central themes. As Ralph Croizier commented in his article: "It is this movement that has most directly challenged the cultural values of Chinese tradition and the political orthodoxies of the Communist regime."\textsuperscript{56} Nevertheless, from the Tian'anmen incident in June 1989 until the early nineties, a time when Chinese society underwent dramatic changes, these central themes were altered and eventually disappeared. During that period, the Chinese government greatly tightened ideological control over intellectuals. Progressive art journals were closed, and the remaining ones were officially "reformed" and stayed conservative. No avant-garde works were allowed to be exhibited in official


\textsuperscript{56} Ralph Croizier, "Nine straws in the wind: A group exhibition of young women artists in Beijing," Third text , 31 (Summer, 1995), p. 98.
venues, and shabby studios and private flats became the only showing and meeting spaces for artists. Meanwhile, the acceleration of economic reform and the commercialization of Chinese society became the primary government policy. By encouraging people to "look ahead"向前看 (xiang qian kan), a term that has the same pronunciation in Chinese as the expression "looking at money" (向钱看), the regime meant to fix the masses' attention on the pragmatic present, and thus, to erase the disturbing memory of the slaughter in 1989.57 As Jianying Zha observed, the "naked greed for money, raw selfishness, complete disregard for moral principles, destruction of the environment, nihilism, vulgarity, corruption, injustice" constituted the new social reality during the post-Tian'anmen period in China.58 It also brought forth new qualities in the contemporary Chinese art of this decade.

In Shanghai, however, the contemporary art scene did not seem to be affected so drastically by the Tian'anmen Square incident, since artists there had been accustomed to use their private studios rather than public spaces and the popular media as the battleground for new art. During this depressed period when many Chinese avant-garde artists left for Western countries in search of freedom, Shanghai, on the contrary, cheered the new vitality of the art world. On November 22, 1991, five Shanghai artists, in collaboration with three from Zhejiang province, put on an exhibition inside a garage located in a quiet downtown area.59 Its unusual venue gave the exhibition a rebellious-sounding name, Garage Show (Chekuzhan 車庫展), which reminds one of the Armory Show of 1913 in New York.

57 Jianying Zha, China Pop—how soap operas, tabloids, and bestellers are transforming a culture, New York, 1995, p. 19.
58 Ibid.
59 For a more detailed introduction to this exhibition, see Wu Liang 吴亮, "Chekuzhan zhaji"車庫展札記, Zhongshan 靈山, 79.4 (July, 1992), pp. 173-7.
This three-day exhibition, which I had the fortune to witness, featured works in different media. Shanghai artist Song Haidong's installations, such as *A Lie Detector* (*Cehuangqi* 測謊器) and *To Save Love From Stupid Lust* (*Baiqìng cong yuchun di xingai zhong zhengjiu chulai* 把愛情從愚蠢的性愛中拯救出來), explored paradox and ambiguity in human nature and "truth." Hu Jianping's 胡建平 (b. 1962) illogical assemblies of daily objects revealed an intention to dissolve the objects' symbolic meanings, while seemingly emphasizing them. In Sun Liang's brilliant oil paintings, one glimpsed odd, floating images, with allusions to Western literature but at the same time attempting to be independent of the artist's mental control. Although the announced theme of this exhibition was "the reality of current experiences" (*dangxia jingyan di xianshi* 當下經驗的現實), many of its works, along with the video installation and the conceptual pieces by the Zhejiang artists, Zhang Peili 張培力 (b. 1957), Geng Jianyi 耿建翌 (b. 1962), and Ni Haifeng 倪海峰 (b. 1946) (all of whom still play an important role in the contemporary Chinese art scene today), exhibited a preference for studying visual vocabularies, art's inner structures, and personal experiences rather than the collective metaphor for ideological revolt so obvious in the New Tide art of the eighties.

From the beginning of the 1990s, quite a few Shanghai artists achieved maturity in both their artistic styles and concepts as the fruit of long-time individual research. Their works have been presented in various important international art exhibitions, such as the 45th Venice Biennale, the Chinese Contemporary Art Show in Berlin and the First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia. Nowadays, Shanghai artists fly back and forth between Shanghai and art venues in Western countries, while Shanghai remains their base camp. The sophisticated urban context, shifting social reality, and the universal worship of money in the re-emerging
metropolis allow their art practice to reflect the most current and sensitive experience of both contemporary Chinese art and society. In an age fraught with the discourses of multiculturalism and cultural identity, living and working in Shanghai is also of great benefit to its artists because of the international opportunities it provides.

Among the numerous gifted Shanghai artists whose individuality and artistic richness would enable one to write a full book about them, I will discuss four in detail. Two of the artists I propose to study, Yu Youhan and Ding Yi, remain faithful to the canvas, while the other two, Shi Yong 施勇 (b. 1963) and Zhou Tiehai, have gone far beyond the limits of painting and sculpture. The reasons why I have chosen these four artists are: (1) they seem to be the most continuously creative Shanghai-based artists during the nineties; (2) their works exemplify mature personal styles and concepts to a higher degree than most other artists in Shanghai; (3) their art practices reflect issues and phenomena unique to the Chinese context while demonstrating their regional characteristics; (4) they have garnered greater recognition in critical circles both within and outside China, with the result that their creations have been shown more widely in the major art venues of the world. My study will not cover the overseas Shanghai artists’ practice, since their art, I think, should be discussed in a different, perhaps broader, cultural and artistic context; and they are not as closely related to the construction of Contemporary Shanghai art scene as those whom I will treat.
Chapter Two  On Canvas

The deficiency of images will be changed. When pressure is relieved, we will surely see the emancipation of untrammeled forms.¹

Wu Liang

Yu Youhan 余友涵

Born in 1943, Yu Youhan is the oldest artist among the four whom I propose to discuss. Though he is already in his middle fifties, his artistic practice of the last two decades is both full of richness and completely contemporary. Like many other artists, Yu fell in love with art in his early youth. Growing up during a period deficient in color and image, he was very lucky to meet some special individuals who turned him to the realm of art.² In 1965, Yu entered the Ceramic Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. In the political campaign of 1966, which signified the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, he was denounced as an anti-revolutionary by his classmates due to his inclination to free-expression and his family background. Yu came from a prosperous middle-class family, and during the Cultural Revolution, his father, a banker, was killed and the family’s property was

¹ Wu Liang 吴亮，"Tuxiang di kuifa—Zhongguo xiandai yishu di jingyu" 图像的匮乏—中国的现代艺术的困境, Jiangsu huakan 江苏画刊, 166.10 (October 1994), p. 3.
² My interview with Yu Youhan, August 16, 1997, Shanghai. During the interview, Yu expressed his gratitude to a primary school art teacher who frequently encouraged his interest in painting. He also admitted that he owes a special debt to Fan Jiman 范锦曼 (1906-1990), a contemporary of Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu. During his teen years, Yu lived next door to Fan, who was a professor at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. Before 1957, when Fan was expelled from the school and sentenced to a twenty-year jail term, his rich collection of modern Western art reproductions and his own Impressionistic water color landscapes provided great inspiration for Yu Youhan’s artistic development.
In spite of these blows, Yu's political passion remained high, and during the sixties, he joined the fanatical youth movement that caused young Chinese to travel around China for the sake of establishing "revolutionary ties" (geming chuanlian 革命串聯). While taking part in a political pilgrimage on foot from Guangdong to Shaoshan, the birthplace of Chairman Mao, Yu became seriously ill with hepatitis and almost died; but for him, this was an unforgettable period of his life, when personal frustration, illness, and social turbulence were interwoven with vehement political passion and belief. It is no wonder then that one sees numerous references to the Cultural Revolution in his work, although in general the period itself was artistically barren.

After Richard Nixon visited China in 1972, the Chinese economy began to recover, and art institutions started reviving. At the age of thirty, Yu commenced teaching at the Shanghai Institute of Arts and Crafts and continued to instruct himself in the painting of landscapes and still lifes, trying to make up for the years wasted during the political turmoil. By the end of the 1970s, he had experimented with various styles of Western modernism, including Monet's (1840-1926) ephemeral visions of changing moments and Cézanne's (1839-1906) studies of the paradoxical relationship between nature and its presentation in art.4

As early as 1979 when Chinese artists began to have more freedom in artistic expression, Yu started his own experiments in abstraction.5 Being tired

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3 Andrew Solomon, "Their irony, humor (and art) can save China," The New York times magazine, (December 19, 1993), p. 66.
4 A good example of the painting of ephemeral visions in Monet's work is Haystack at Sunset Near Giverny, painted in 1891. William C. Seitz, Claude Monet, New York, 1960, p. 139. For the paradoxical relationship between nature and its presentation in art, see the discussion in Jack Lindsay, Cézanne—his life and art, London, 1969, pp. 302-5.
5 According to my interview, Yu's first abstract painting, The Great Wall (Changcheng 長城) was made as early as 1979. This gouache was composed of simple curved lines rendered on top of a red and green background. Unfortunately, Yu does not possess any visual records of this lost work.
of the endless political movements and the utilitarian and conservative approaches to art making in China, Yu wanted to create "a new painting" (yizhong xinhua 一種新畫) which would allow him to express directly "the eternal and ever-changing universe" (yongheng bianhua de yuzhou 永恆變化的宇宙). It seemed inevitable that during this creative process, Yu would receive even more inspiration from Western modernism.

During my interview with Yu, he mentioned Cézanne as an early influence with regard to the formal relationship between the perceptible external reality and the inner reality of art. In 1983, the opportunity to see Jackson Pollock's original works in the Shanghai Museum further consolidated his ideas about the formalist construction of painting. Two years later, Yu showed his abstract works for the first time to Shanghai audiences in the Exhibition of Six Modernists held at Fudan University. Among his exhibited works, The Black Circle (Heise yuan 黑色圓) (plate 2.1) announced the birth of Yu's Circle Series (Yuan xilie 圓系列), the first stage in his artistic creation.

In this painting, he washed a very thin layer of diluted black acrylic onto the surface of raw canvas, on top of which irregular, random brush strokes whirled with order in a circle. Yu's non-representational approach surely seconded Cézanne's idea that painting is neither the reproduction of nature nor the passive registration of perceptual experience. At the same time, however, he transcended Cézanne's struggle between nature and art, making his painting a direct formal expression of his intuitions and concepts. That can probably be attributed to his experience of seeing Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist

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7 My interview with Yu Youhan on August 16, 1997.
8 Cézanne himself wrote: "One must not reproduce nature, one must interpret it. By what means? By means of plastic equivalents and of colour." See Nicholas Wadley, Cézanne and his art, New York, 1975, p. 47.

In Yu's Circle Series, one does not feel the strong emotion, chaos, and tension as seen on Jackson Pollock's splash surfaces. Rather, Yu's construction of the whole image embodies an orderly unity between paradoxical but interrelated elements. In his abstract renditions (plates 2.2, 2.3), there is a visible balance between simplicity and complexity, between randomness and order, between the process of covering (manifested in the overlapping brush strokes) and of revelation (i.e. the intentionally uncovered texture of paint and raw canvas), or between the desire for breaking free (from the circle) and the determination of restraining oneself (inside it).

This visual quality is certainly related to his interest in Daoism at that time. In his letter to me discussing the concepts behind his Circle Series, Yu wrote: "The dots (short brush strokes) express Laozi's idea that 'the Way gave birth to one, one gave birth to two, two gave birth to three, and three gave birth to the universe'."9 In the same letter, he also explained his interest in the simple image of a circle after having experimented with different sorts of abstract painting as a result of his love for "grasping things as a whole" (dui shiwu jinxing zhengtixing bawo 對事物進行整體性把握).10 Yu tried to use the relationship between dots and circles to illustrate the flow and changes within the matter of the universe, as well as the simplicity of its beginning and the richness of its development.11

In an essay on Yu Youhan's art, Wu Liang commented that by painting circles, Yu "found the best form to articulate his concepts...and meanwhile, his

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10 Ibid.
11 Yu can be generally considered as a part of the "New Tide Art Movement of '85." Gao Minglu gave a quite detailed discussion of the relationship between Daoism and Yu Youhan's Circle Series in his Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi, pp. 189-190.
form was rich in its own meaning." In view of Wu's formalist preferences, the "meaning" he indicated here very likely refers to the self-sufficiency of formal aesthetics. Wu suggested that by creating rich textures and gradated tones on his seemingly monotonous canvases, Yu legitimized his circles as existing facts in themselves. I would like to argue that this was not the case, since Yu's exploration of abstract form was mainly in the service of conveying his philosophical content, not for the sake of pure visual and formal experiments. This point will be clear in my later discussion of Ding Yi's abstract painting, which would offer a convincing example of the "meaning" (yiwei 意味) Wu Liang implied.

Yu Youhan's practice at this period manifests an effort to borrow Western-influenced artistic forms to express indigenous cultural content. In one of his Circle Series (plate 2.4), he allowed the paint, canvas, and gravity to interact with each other in a state free from the control or even interference of the artist, leaving the marks of freely flowing paint on his raw, unstretched canvas. This method may remind one of the Zürich Dadaist, Jean Arp's (1887-1966) emphasis on "the laws of chance" in creating art works and of Jackson Pollock's claim that "the painting has a life of its own." There is no material to prove whether Yu Youhan was as strongly influenced by Jean Arp as by Jackson Pollock (1919-1956), but it is easy to perceive the disparities between his art and those of the two Western modernists. First of all, Yu's work was not the spontaneous outcome containing no "meaning or cerebral intention" pursued by Arp. Nor was it the result of "getting inside the canvas" to act physically

12 Wu Liang, "Yuan he ouxiang: Guanyu Yu Youhan" 約和偶像: 關於余友涵, Yishu shijie 藝術世界, 80.1 (February, 1993), p. 31.
14 Arnason, p. 226.
in the way that Pollock did. In accordance with Yu's great interest in Daoism, his special approach to canvas may well reflect the Daoist idea of "action through non-action" (wuwei zhi wei 無為之為). By allowing the natural forces to complete an artistic product, he visualized a philosophical logic of creation deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Seen in this light, Yu's abstract painting was not just an imitation of Western modernism but was rather imbued with the essence of Chineseness, a cultural identity, unremittingly sought by Yu throughout his artistic career.

Yu Youhan continued to work on his Circle Series until 1989. As he admitted later, it offered him a way to find a tranquil, private space in the face of external turmoil and instability. On some occasions (plates 2.5, 2.6), he even allowed bright colors (more often than not, basic colors) to break through the meditative solemnity of his monochrome renditions. In those rare cases, there was no residue of recognizable subject. The glistening brush strokes spread rampantly as far as they could reach, creating pure abstract surfaces possessing an inner order and structure.

In 1989, one of Yu Youhan's Circles was shown in the now famous China/Avant-garde Exhibition in Beijing, but it did not attract much attention from the audience. Compared with the shocking performances of other artists in that show, his abstract painting probably seemed too reticent and introspective. However, as one of the first few Shanghai artists to begin experimenting with abstract painting after the Cultural Revolution, Yu exercised a decisive influence on the artistic practice of some younger artists.

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16 One of the original passages that uses this term reads: "Perform non-action, and then there is nothing you do not do." ("Wei wuwei ze wu buwei yi" 無為則無不為矣). He Lunjing 何倫經 ed. and comm., Laozi jiaogu 老子校詮, Taipei, 1966, p. 37.
17 My interview with Yu on August 16, 1997.
Shanghai painters, among them Ding Yi and Qin Yifeng. However, most viewers of contemporary Chinese art are more familiar with him as a pioneer of Political Pop rather than abstract painting.

1988 and 1989 marked a crucial transition in Yu Youhan's artistic career. He suddenly set aside the Daoist meditation of his circles and became one of the first Chinese artists to introduce the image of Mao Zedong into post-Mao painting. *Mao Zedong and Whitney Huston* (*Mao Zedong he Huiteni - Xiusidun* 毛澤東和惠特尼·休斯頓) (plate 2.7) is the first piece of his so-called *Mao Series* (*Mao xilie* 毛係列) which juxtaposes Mao Zedong, a Chinese political icon, with Whitney Huston, an idol of Western pop culture. Painted after press photographs, both images remain realistic, but the artist's stylistic manipulation is not difficult to discern. Yu molded the images of the two celebrities from bright color blocks and reductive brush strokes, with their features highlighted in a way derived from propaganda art. The garish surface, the rough execution, as well as the awkward encounter between Communism and capitalism, East and West, imbue Yu's iconographic collage with a sense of playfulness and irony.

After this piece, Yu Youhan produced more Mao paintings, in all of which Mao Zedong retains the same idealized image of an affable, people-loving, and superhuman leader, an image so familiar in earlier Communist propaganda art (plate 2.8). However, under Yu Youhan's brush one experiences a feeling of strangeness, ambiguity, and cynicism. Sometimes, Mao's image is deconstructed into colorful brush strokes or linear contours, taking on digitalized or cartoon-like features (plate 2.9). Sometimes, the Great Helmsman stands side by side with female beauties in their bikinis or with Western pop stars. Even when he appears in certain classical scenes from the history of the Chinese Communist Party, such as the one showing him planning military strategies with Zhu De 朱德 (plate 2.10) or another depicting him together with Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (left)
and Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (right) (plate 2.11), the sense of familiarity and seriousness is equally fugitive. These paintings' flat, vulgar floral patterns, butterflies, or equally two-dimensional but whimsical images from the ancient *Classic of the Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing* 山海經) negate any possible visual or historical "depth."

Beyond any doubt, the methods of Yu Youhan's *Mao Series* are derived from American Pop Art. Yu's manneristic reproduction of "a second reality," namely, the portrait of a mass idol so familiar to a mass audience, "has documented his closeness to the image world of the mass media," a quality which Andreas Huyssen associates with American Pop Art.18 Even Yu's colors, as a German scholar has pointed out, "correspond more to the smooth coldness of the consumer aesthetic," another quality prevalent in American Pop art.19 Furthermore, although American Pop artists of the 1960s used their new art form to attack the Abstract Expressionism that had dominated painting in the United States during the later 1940s and the 1950s, most of them resembled Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925) in beginning to paint under the influence of Abstract Expressionism but never completely rejecting its approach and techniques.20 Similarly, Yu Youhan transformed himself from an abstract painter meditating in his own spiritual realm into a Political Pop artist, who in his *Mao Series* asserted his interest in "reality, political phenomena, popular taste, and idol worship...etc."21 At the same time, however, his preference for both formal aesthetics and the principle of visual reduction displayed his unbreakable attachment to abstraction in painting.

20 Arnason, pp. 448, 452-5.
21 Wu Liang, "Yuan he ouxiang," p. 31.
What was the impetus behind Yu Youhan's sudden artistic change? Was it simply the result of the influence of newer Western art? How does he view both his abstract painting and his so-called Political Pop art? Answers to these questions will enable us to understand his art with greater depth.

We have already seen how in his Circle Series Yu employed techniques ostensibly derived from modern Western art to locate concepts rooted in ancient Chinese culture. However, in Yu Youhan's own judgment, this synthesis was not a success:

Although my earlier works [i.e. his abstract paintings] took into consideration the expression of the Chinese [consciousness], I did not succeed. Many found them too Western. What is this authentic Chinese consciousness? I think it is superficial to search for it only on a formal level. We have to draw on the spiritual aspects of culture.22

These sentences are highly suggestive. First of all, we discover that Yu Youhan's approach to making art does not go beyond the Chinese didactic tradition of using form "as a vehicle for the Way" (xing yi zaidao 形以載道).23 Formalistic expression seems to be of great importance in his painting, but content and its communication are actually Yu's major concern. Second, we can say that Yu Youhan is a painter with a strong Chinese consciousness. He prefers Chinese content in his art, hoping his works will appeal to those who appreciate Chineseness over "Westernness" either for intellectual reasons or simply

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22 Cited in Wolfgar Pöhlmann, p. 181.
23 The traditional formulation of this idea is "literature as a vehicle for the Way" (wen yi zai dao 文以載道), first found in the writings of Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-73). See the discussion in James J. Y. Liu, Chinese theories of literature, Chicago, 1975, pp. 114, 128. Although Zhou Dunyi's statement has to do with the writing of poetry and prose works, the same basic idea can be applied to the visual arts, hence my rewording of Zhou's dictum.
because the latter is beyond their understanding. Third, behind his last two sentences looms his new approach to painting. He questioned his previous study of the abstract form on canvas and determined to search for the "authentic Chinese consciousness," as we will see later, by engaging his painting with the current social and political life of the Chinese people.  

In one of his letters, Yu also reflected on the reason for this artistic shift, writing:

At the end of the eighties, I thought that the Circle Series was quite good, but it resembled the "ivory tower" too much, and had nothing to do with the masses and society. (Didn't it?) I wanted to propel society forward! (this seems naive now) Thus, I gave up painting circles and changed to the Pop style. If we compare it to the Circle Series, the Mao Series is like the details in the circles. It reflects the social, political,

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24 In China, the word "spirituality" (jingshenxìng 精神性) has been used in different ways in different contexts. For the Chinese government, the propaganda buzz word "socialist spiritual civilization" (shèhuì zhuyì jingshen wenming 社会主義精神文明) indicates certain social courtesies uncontaminated by Western capitalist ideology. Contemporary Chinese artists and critics also frequently mention "spirituality" in their discussions of art and culture. However, they seem to use it in ways that are very different from the government and that even vary from artist to artist and from critic to critic. For a good example of this, see Xianyi 頜藝 and Huangdu 黃鴻 ed., "'Yishu yu wenhua, jingshen yu yuyan' zuotanhui "W" »ll:£flS,ffii*IIOT, Meishu, 252.12 (December, 1988), pp. 4-9. In this article, critics and artists discuss the relationship between "spirituality" (or "spirit") in contemporary Chinese art works and the visual vocabulary, an external form through which the non-material is expressed. Althought they have different views about this issue, the discussion proves that "spirituality" was, still is, a very important concern in the contemporary Chinese art world. For Yu Youhan, the word "spiritual" suggests the essence of native culture and the Chinese identity in art. For Zhou Tiehai, another Shanghai artist who uses the term from time to time (as we will see in the following chapter), it frequently means what is opposed to the pursuit of the material. We must stress that none of the Shanghai artists seem to use the word "spiritual" with the religious connotations it has in the West. However, some of them may be influenced by the traditional Chinese critical term "spiritual resonance" (qìyùn 氣韻 or shényùn 神韻), an almost equally nebulous word that often refers to the strength of an artist's brush strokes as a manifestation of his inner (i. e., "spiritual") qualities. See Shen Zicheng 沈子丞 ed., Lidai lunhua mingzhu huibian 歷代論畫名著集編, Beijing, 1982.
and spiritual life of Chinese society and its people during the actual period of my life from 1949 to the eighties (from the age of six to forty). 25

These lines further reveal Yu Youhan's attitudes toward the function and the role of art in its relationship to the society. His ideas can be seen as a legacy of the Maoist ideology of art and literature and also reflect his desire to create an indigenous soil and support for his art.

In short, Yu Youhan was not satisfied with abstract painting, since it failed to realize his object of making Chinese-oriented art, which can be more widely appreciated by the Chinese audience. His concern with the relationship between imported Western visual forms and indigenous cultural elements in his art, along with his hesitation between the individualized exploration of the formal and conceptual in painting and his desire to reflect the demands of the masses and external reality, remind us of Yu's predecessors from the great Shanghai age, all of whom faced the same challenge and choice.

Although his personal preferences were certainly important, the new social conditions emerging during the late 1980s contributed greatly to the formation of Yu Youhan's Mao Series, the second stage of his mature artistic creation. As a result of China's reopening to the West and its rapid economic reform, a "socialist market economy" developed quickly during the later 1980s. The commercialization of Chinese society brought people the comforts of material life, while at the same time undermining the communist value system and utopian ideals that had dominated the country during the Mao era. By the late 1980s, increasing lust for money, selfish behavior, anxiety, general distrust, and feelings of insecurity entered into the new psyche of the Chinese masses. A feeling of profound loss and great disillusionment prevailed in the generation

that had grown up with strong social idealism during the Cultural Revolution. As art critic Li Xianting observed, during the late 1980s and especially after the Tiananmen Square incident, "a popular revival of the Mao Zedong cult was sweeping the nation."\(^\text{26}\) Mao became the subject of numerous new songs and books reflecting the early Cultural Revolution period, and also appeared as a common image on T-shirts and other commodities. Li pointed out:

There was...a more complex popular mentality at work in the history of Political Pop in China than we have seen in either the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. The Mao craze of the early 1990s reflected a Mao obsession...that combined both a nostalgia for the simpler, less corrupt, and more self-assured period of Mao's rule with a desire to appropriate Mao Zedong, the paramount god of the past, in ventures satirizing life and politics in contemporary China.\(^\text{27}\)

In the light of these events, Yu Youhan's creation of the *Mao Series* during the late 1980s seems very understandable. By creating his own Mao cult on canvas, which touched both the collective memory and the current experience of his intended Chinese audience, Yu was able to put into practice his idea of reflecting the common consciousness of Chinese people and their current social reality.

Meanwhile, Yu's personal feelings about Mao Zedong were quite ambivalent. Benefitting from the greater artistic freedom allowed in China, Yu was now able to employ his own artistic vocabulary to portray the image of the Helmsman, a deified political icon that had once dictated the life and mentality of many Chinese people, including the artist himself. In Yu's writings, he admitted that he felt an "unprecedented delight" (*qiansuoweiyou de yukuai* 前所


\(^\text{27}\) Ibid.
when he saw the first Mao image rendered in his individual style, since it expressed pent-up words that he had wished to say for many years. This artistic freedom certainly gave Yu Youhan, along with many other Chinese artists, confidence to withdraw from the shadow of the repression of humanism during the Maoist era. However, growing up under "the spiritual radiance of Chairman Mao," Yu seemed unable to shake off the memory of those passionate days. His obsessive visions of Mao Zedong remained radiant, as if emerging from colorful dreams of a long-vanished happy world. In his *Mao Series*, uneasiness about the commercialization of Chinese society seems even more dominant than his criticism of the dogmatic past. This is evident in their vulgar colors and excessive ornamentation, which very likely allude to the tasteless extravagance of the commercial surroundings he depicts, but even more so in the way that past idealism meets the present confusion of values, and the Communist hero is juxtaposed with Western market icons. Are Yu Youhan's Mao paintings personal flashbacks and bitter nostalgia? Or are they intended as ironic comment on both the current and the past political reality in China? Probably even the artist himself cannot answer these questions very clearly.

In 1993 Li Xianting organized the show "China's New Art, Post-1989" in the Hanart Gallery in Hong Kong, exhibiting more than two hundred works by fifty-one artists in the styles of Political Pop (*zhengzhi bopu*) and Cynical Realism (*wanshi xianshizhuyi*), terms that had been coined by Li himself. This was the first major show of Mainland Chinese avant-garde art outside the country and was a huge success, largely because its political content caught the attention of the foreign media.

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28 Yu Youhan's unpublished notes on art written in July 1997, provided by the artist.
unique renditions of Mao Zedong immediately caught the eye of the overseas audience, and he soon came to be regarded as one of the leading contemporary Chinese painters of the post-Mao era.\textsuperscript{30} Shortly afterwards, his Mao paintings were shown in various international exhibitions, including such prestigious ones as the Forty-fifth Venice Biennale (1993) and the Biennial of Sao Paolo (1994).\textsuperscript{31} They also appeared frequently on the covers of important catalogues of Chinese contemporary art published in the West.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to garnering him fame, the success of Yu's \textit{Mao Series} improved his economic circumstances, and by selling his paintings to Western and Hong Kong collectors, he was able to buy himself a decent studio on the outskirts of Shanghai.

In November of 1994, Yu's fame as a painter of Mao Zedong helped him to obtain a visa from the U. S. Consulate in Shanghai, after which he traveled to New York, the world center of contemporary art. During his residence there, Yu finished several paintings juxtaposing Mao Zedong and the Statue of Liberty. However, ideological freedom and the possibility of making a fortune, two strong attractions for the many Chinese immigrant artists living in the United States, did not hold Yu in New York very long, and in 1995 he returned to Shanghai. His nine-month residence in New York provided him a better knowledge of contemporary art practice in the West, but the newest and most fashionable artistic trends did not arouse his interest very much. What he was concerned with was still the Chinese content in his painting and its relationship to the indigenous soil from which his Chineseness grows. Why did Yu's \textit{Mao Series} and other Political Pop and Cynical Realist paintings become successful quickly with Western audiences (particularly with individuals interested in

\textsuperscript{30} See my detailed discussion on Chinese Pop and Cynical Realistic painting in Chapter 4, pp. 126-7.
\textsuperscript{31} Shanghai artists informed me that the second of these shows was considered counter-revolutionary by the Chinese government.
\textsuperscript{32} For example, see Jochen Noth et al ed.; and Nicholas Jose ed., \textit{Mao goes pop: China post-1989}, Sydney, 1993.
Chinese politics) but fail to arouse much enthusiasm among ordinary Chinese
people? What was the perspective through which the Western media commonly
view Chinese art? How could he create paintings of "authentic Chinese
consciousness," which would appeal to a broad Chinese audience, but not just
Westerners inspired by Post-Cold War stereotypes or a taste for "exotic" cultures?
With all these questions in his mind, Yu Youhan prepared to move into the next
phase of his career.

In the summer of 1996, I saw a group of new paintings hanging on the
wall of his home, all of which retained his earlier formal reduction while
excluding both the political icons of the Mao era and the idols of contemporary
commercial culture. In one of these works, *Earth (Di 地)*, the artist depicted a
map illustrating southeastern China. In the center of this painting, there is a
hand holding a magnifying glass which blows up the region of Shanghai in the
shape of a surging dragon head (plate 2.12). The pinkish floral patterns
covering this part of China resemble the decoration in his Mao paintings, but in
this work they create a rich background for a land undergoing a tremendous
economic development, in which Shanghai plays a leading role. In another
painting *Statue (Xiang 像)* we see a collage of symbols for various religions and
folk beliefs, including Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, fortune telling, and
prayers for good luck, reflecting the variety and freedom of the Chinese
people's spiritual life in an age of great ideological change (plate 2.13). Here
East still meets the West, but this meeting no longer has overt political
connotations and is not concerned with intellectual matters. Rather it displays
something new, but commonplace in the daily life of ordinary Chinese people.
The other paintings in this group depict even more commonplace and trivial
scenes of modern China, including such images as the Shanghai Television
Tower, a motor car decorated for a wedding, or a lady with a cat. Yu called this
new series *Reading Through Pictures* (*Kantu shizi 看圖識字*), a name inspired by children's literacy textbooks. By creating simple pictures resembling those found in such books, he was attempting to delete overt political references from his own paintings, and to make them more easily readable by the ordinary Chinese viewer. Yu painted ten pieces for this new series but later destroyed seven of them, since he was troubled by the problem of the relationship between formal arrangement and the expression of content.33

In late 1996, Yu allowed political icons to reappear on his canvas, finishing four paintings that portrayed Deng Xiaoping. These works combined a quite realistic rendition of this political image with a renewed celebration of the artist's long suppressed interest in formal experiment (plates 2.14-17).

Significantly, in 1997, these works were exhibited in the Changning District Art Center in Shanghai (Shanghai Changning qu yishu zhongxin 上海長寧區藝術中心), the first time in many years that he had showed his work in a venue inside China.

Based on his experiments in *Reading Through Pictures* Yu Youhan created a new series during the second part of 1997, which he entitled *Looking At the Present Age for Truly Great Men* (*Shu fengliu renwu hai kan jinzhao 數風流人物還看今朝*). Representing his third mature artistic stage, these new paintings are highly consistent in style and are characterized by dense images, flashy colors, and sketchy renditions (plates 2.18-22). The title of the series alludes to well-known lines from Mao Zedong's *ci* poem, "Snow: To the Tune of Qinyuanchun" ("Qinyuanchun xue" 沁園春 雪). 34 Yu's generalized but lively

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34 Mao Zedong, "Qinyuanchun xue" 沁園春 雪, in Zang Kejia 增克家 expl. and Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫 comm., *Mao zhuxi shici jiangjie 毛主席詩詞講解*, Beijing, 1962, pp. 31-2. The concluding two lines of the *ci* poem alluded to by Yu in the title of his series are translated by Nancy Lin as: "For manhood florid and full,/ Look—the galaxy today," and are supposed to "refer to the proletariat." Nancy Lin, *Reverberations—a new translation of the*
descriptions of the panorama of contemporary Chinese life, realized by presenting diverse images of ordinary Chinese people, are in line with Mao's idea that the most important people are those of the present. In these new paintings, Yu's juxtaposition of images from the mass media together with occasional hints of workers and students from the Cultural Revolution painting vaguely remind one of his Mao Series. However, the elimination of images of celebrities and scenes of cultural and political exoticism separate them from the latter. In his notes on art written in the same year, Yu claimed:

What I am interested in is the nature of art. I think that good art works surely derive from life, which is not only the individual, trivial life of the artist, but even more so the broad life of the masses in its connection with the age. Thus... in the couple of years I have also been trying to portray ordinary Chinese people.

By doing so, Yu was striving to create a contemporary mass art, seemingly unsophisticated and intended for ordinary Chinese people.

For any painter, giving up a favorably-received "signature" and shifting to something new is always a great challenge and risk. For Yu Youhan, a contemporary Chinese artist who is no longer young, doing so over and over demands special courage. Will Western audiences and collectors be interested in his new people's art? Will it be Chinese enough to create mass interest at home? No matter what the answers are, Yu Youhan's social responsibility and his trueness to his artistic ideals have never been in doubt.

35 Yu Youhan's unpublished notes on art, written in July 1997, provided by the artist.
Ding Yi

Born in Shanghai in the year 1962, Ding Yi was once a student of Yu Youhan and later became his colleague. While Yu keeps on searching for Chinese consciousness in his painting, Ding adopts a formalist approach which finds universality in individual experience and realizes constant change in the form of apparent non-change. During the last ten years, Ding has only painted works based on the sign +. + is a sign used in print marking, for Ding Yi it symbolizes simplicity and objectivity, embodying no cultural and political connotations. His unwavering devotion to non-objective painting and his constant advocacy of restoring autonomy to art represent one important tendency in contemporary Shanghai art practice.

During the 1980s, Ding Yi's enthusiasm for the Chinese New Wave art movement caused him to become a performance artist on some occasions. However, his quiet, introverted, and rational personality, coupled with his innate fascination for visual elements, have kept him tied to the canvas for most of his career.

In 1986, Ding entered the Chinese Traditional Painting Department of the Fine Arts College, Shanghai University. The study of Chinese brush painting very soon allowed him to realize that this traditional expression focuses mainly on cultural references, the imagination, and codified visual vocabularies, but "neglects what for him is the most relevant aspect of artistic creation: the visual sense." In a later interview, Ding also criticized "what he calls the Chinese

36 On October 12 and 13, 1986, Ding Yi together with two of his classmates gave cloth-wrapping performances in various public spaces of Shanghai, see Chapter One, p. 24. About one month later, they participated in the first Concave and Convex exhibition held in the city, showing slides of their performances. Gao Minglu, pp. 179, 382-3.
37 Monica Dematte, "Simplicity, complexity, synthesis--Ding Yi's painting process," in her English-language manuscript, provided to me by Ding Yi, p. 1. A Chinese translation is found in Monica Dematte, "Jiandan fuza
habit of finding beauty only in recognizable objects," arguing that "the Chinese find beauty in nature only when they can associate its likeness to something else, or when they know it represents something important in history." On the contrary, what he wants the viewer to see is "the object itself, not the object it represents."

Ding's general dissatisfaction with the Chinese way of seeing caused him to look into foreign visual forms for some solution. Actually, his experiment with modern Western painting started in the early eighties, and his great sensitivity to the internal structure of colors and forms is clearly visible in his early canvases, works in which he developed his own individual, non-representational style. His 1983 landscape Red House Street (Hong fangzi jiedao (plate 2.23) deeply influenced by Maurice Utrillo (1885-1955) already contained anticipations of vertical-horizontal composition and an orderly surface defined by lines, characteristics which would be fundamental to his Cross Series (Shishi xilie (plate 2.23) later. In another painting made in 1983, Ding eliminated illusionistic reality from his canvas and started to follow a Mondrian-like progression in pursuit of "a true vision of reality." In this work which he called Heroism (Yingxiong zhuyi (plate 2.24), we see a non-objective composition, in which expanding, interacting color blocks struggle with his hard-edged, geometrical division of the surface, creating the

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39 Ibid.
"equilibrium of dynamic movement of color and form" as pursued by Piet Mondrian (1872-1944).41

Very soon Ding's abstract painting revealed a tendency to simplify, quite possibly influenced directly by Yu Youhan's Circle Series. During the 1980s, Ding and Yu were very close; they were not only student and teacher, but were also good friends, organizing experimental exhibitions together and frequently exchanging artistic ideas. Yu's influence on Ding is clearly seen in Ding's Taboo (Jinji 禁忌), a work of 1986 (plate 2.25). In this piece, Ding's earlier rich color blocks give way to straightforward brush strokes, forming clear abstract patterns similar to Yu's circle paintings. If the work's title did not suggest that its cross patterns have symbolic meaning, one would be tempted to take it as the beginning of Ding's Cross Series.

However, his Cross Series did not really come into being until 1988.42 In that year, Ding began to cover his canvases with crosses, simple structures which, in his mind, are not to be taken as symbols for Western Christianity but are totally devoid of any cultural or historical content. He even changed his name from Ding Rong 丁榮, written with nine strokes in the simplified Chinese script, into Ding Yi, consisting of only three strokes, to demonstrate his strong preference for visual simplification. By avoiding ordinary titles and inscribing each of his cross paintings with only a serial number and the year of its execution, Ding made his works seem like objective reports of laboratory experiments. Unlike Yu Youhan, who attempted to express philosophical concepts deriving from traditional Chinese culture in his Circle Series, Ding was determined to eliminate any concrete content or overt self-expression from his

41 Ibid.
42 Monica Dematte, "Simplicity," p. 2. According to Dematte, the first painting in Ding Yi's Cross Series consisted of three strips of basic colors: red, blue and yellow, with black crosses on the top.
Cross Series. For him, form was not a vehicle for the Way, but an object of pure perceptual experience.

In Ding's earliest cross works (plate 2.26) a ruler and other tools were employed to produce straight lines and precise patterns. Creating these paintings required a lot of time and labor and demanded that he work in a highly meticulous way. Thus, the action of painting became more a process of making than one of expressing. In these works Ding's choice of colors (mainly primary colors) was obviously based more on "the physical laws of light" than on the color theories advanced in modern Western art history. As a result, these paintings displayed qualities of scientific precision and industrial coolness (plate 2.27). Although Ding Yi gradually introduced diagonals and a wider range of colors into the grid-locked surfaces of his earliest cross paintings, even these enriched works remained, in his own words, "complete and exact as the formula 1+1=2." 

In his abstract paintings Ding aimed at evoking a pure visual experience which supposedly could be realized without relying on the viewer's knowledge of art or any cultural background. The viewer is encouraged to be lost completely in the richness and dynamism of these mechanical-looking labyrinths, his eyes wandering from line to line, color to color, and from flat details to the shifting depth of the painting as a whole. By emphasizing this eye-oriented experience, Ding hoped that his art could be appreciated by the widest range of audiences, both Chinese and Western, intellectuals and common people.

44 Ding Yi 丁乙, "Ding Yi yishu zilun" 丁乙藝術録, unpublished manuscript, written in 1995, available though the author of this study, p. 1.
45 In one interview, Ding Yi said: "I once tried to make ordinary people understand and like my work, for example, by creating beautiful colors, which are good-looking and interesting." 我也試圖讓普通人領會或喜歡我的作品, 比如看著顏色漂亮, 好看, 有趣。 Xu Xiaoyu 許曉煜, "Ren wufa baituo lishi—
However, this hope was only an artistic ideal, and Ding confronted some fundamental dilemmas in putting his theories into practice. First, as the critic John Berger has pointed out: "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe," so how could both Western and Chinese viewers be expected to appreciate his works in the same ways? Furthermore, how could Ding attract a wide audience of both intellectuals and common people with an art form that seems far too incomprehensible to appeal to the masses? His practical experiences soon demonstrated the problems inherent in his theories, for when he participated in the 1989 China/Avant-garde Exhibition in Beijing by showing two pieces from his cross series, his works received no attention from the public. Significantly, the conservative art education system in China and prevailing aesthetic conventions that make it impossible for most viewers to appreciate any painting not done in a realistic style were not the only factors causing this neglect. This exhibition, which aimed to be an epitome of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s, was dominated by works emphasizing ideological liberation and media effect, and compared to the shocking performances or even paintings and installations tinged with strong political connotations, Ding's art-for-art's-sake canvases seemed too tame and strangely unfashionable.

Luckily, however, Ding Yi is not a pure conceptualist, for whom, according to Sol Lewitt's famous dictum, "the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work..." while "the execution is a perfunctory affair." Nor is he a fashionable avant-gardist. Otherwise, we would not see him still painting his Cross Series. For Ding Yi, painting is not just the realization of

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Ding Yi 人無法擺脫歷史--丁乙, minutes of an interview conducted on July 16, 1996 by Xu Xiaoyu in Shanghai, unpublished, provided by Ding Yi, p. 2.
46 John Berger, Ways of seeing, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 27.
one's artistic concepts or ideals. More importantly, it is an introspective life style, an intimate but challenging relationship between the painter and his painting materials, along with his own visual vocabulary. Therefore, execution becomes a very conscientious affair, and the artist is more fascinated by the questions or challenges arising from within the painting itself rather than by dilemmas or issues derived from the outside world.

In the early 1990s, when paintings of Political Pop and Cynical Realism emerged in contemporary Chinese art circles as overt comment on the social and political situation, Ding Yi persisted in painting crosses in his suburban studio, committing himself to exploring the potentials of painting as a self-sufficient entity.

Up until 1991 Ding continued painting his cross works with the assistance of rulers and masking tape. During this period, he gradually emancipated his colors from strict adherence to the scientific relationships he had espoused earlier, and from time to time he also painted on corrugated paper to achieve different textural effects (plate 2.28).

In the first part of 1991, Ding decided to abandon the use of external aids and to rely entirely on his own hands in the creation of his works. He did this partially for the sake of a new challenge, but new insight into the concepts of precision and completeness also contributed to this fundamental change. Like an enlightened mendicant, he realized that the qualities of precision and completeness should not be pursued solely through exterior forms, but that they must become interior essences embodied in one's attitudes towards painting and even life. Thus, Ding Yi Cross Series entered a completely new phase.

In the new cross paintings (plates 2.29, 2.30), straight lines disappear, and surfaces are no longer evenly and exactly divided by homogenous patterns. The cross still provides the fundamental structure, but each work is created from a
fluid combination of innumerable short brush strokes, free, casual, and composed of random colors. The previous rigidity and stability are replaced by liveliness and even an apparent chaos. The surface is now charged with a luminous brilliance created by his pointillist brushwork, which, as he desired, "restores the qualities of the natural colors: their banality, sparkle, radiance, and the novelty resulting from their juxtaposition." In general, these new paintings of Ding Yi's Cross Series no longer resemble controlled and unemotional laboratory reports, but primary sites for witnessing the repeated and momentary contacts between the painter's brush-end and the surface of the canvas. While precision and completeness are still upheld as inner principles, spontaneity now plays a crucial role in execution, giving rise to a higher degree of complexity and self-sufficiency.

By changing his way of painting, Ding Yi created a new relationship between his canvas (or paper) and his visual vocabulary. His works became more natural, relaxed, and at the same time, more direct and intimate. The process of painting now consumed less time and became more enjoyable. For several months, Ding Yi indulged in this new experiment and very quickly attained a full mastery of the required skills, writing in his notes: "Craftsmanship hinders the natural development of art. The craftsmanship in an art work only implies banality of perception." Ding felt that painting should always be a new and challenging experience, both physically and mentally, and as soon as he achieved full mastery of his new approach, he abandoned his earlier methods, introducing more complexity into his cross designs (plates 2.31, 2.32).

48 Ding Yi, "Ding Yi yishu zalun," p. 1.
In light of the above, one can easily understand why Ding Yi constantly innovates with his painting materials. Most of his earlier cross paintings employed acrylic on treated canvases, but very soon he found that the relationship between acrylic and treated canvas is too conventional and that reluctance to abandon traditional materials disrupts harmony between painting and new artistic concepts. As a result, he changed his method by applying acrylic directly to raw canvases and allowing the paint to soak into the surfaces more naturally (plate 2.33). From time to time, he also created a very different texture by employing water-color pens or pencils to paint cross works on corrugated paper (plates 2.34). In 1993, Ding Yi started to combine charcoal and acrylic on raw linen, but again he noticed that acrylic seems too industrial when combined with these natural-looking materials and quickly discovered that chalk could replace acrylic to good effect. Chalk worked particularly well with charcoal on the surface of raw linen or coarse paper, since both created a congenial, powdery texture, making his cross labyrinths seem more natural and spontaneous (plates 2.35, 2.36).

In addition to creating new visual effects, this original combination of materials enabled Ding Yi to redefine the concept of painting in a significant way. First, as the Italian scholar Monica Dematte pointed out, the "soft brush strokes" (ranbi 軟筆) of traditional Chinese and Western painting were now replaced by the "hard touch" (yingbi huahen 硬筆劃痕) created by chalk and charcoal.\(^{50}\) Painting became even more a physical contact between concrete, but changing materials, for when chalk and charcoal made contact with the texture of the raw linen or coarse paper, the first two interacted, changing from solids into powders, which either joined the surfaces or spread over them in a spontaneous way. At this point in his career, Ding Yi was no longer treating

\(^{50}\) Ibid. Dematté, "Simplicity," pp. 5-6.
painting as a process for creating illusion (even eye-oriented illusion) but transformed it into a site where physicality could display the organic beauty of materials in a way beyond the total control of the artist.

Secondly, the new combination of materials brought Ding Yi new technical challenges. Chalk and charcoal provided him with a very limited color range, within which his creativity in the use of color was tested to the limit. Moreover, since chalk and charcoal are too dry and powdery to be easily fixed on untreated surfaces, he began utilizing such unconventional materials as hair-mousse and cockroach spray as substitutes for traditional paint fixer.

In 1993, Ding Yi's cross paintings were featured in the Post-1989 Modern Chinese Art Exhibition in Hong Kong, a show later travelling in various revised versions to Australia, Germany, England, Holland, Denmark and Canada. In the same year, Western curators also chose his cross paintings (plates 2.37, 2.38) to be shown in two of the most prestigious contemporary art exhibitions in the world, the 45th Venice Biennale and the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane. In neither of these shows did his works become the focus of the popular Western media, since Chinese art with political content was more attractive to most news reporters. Nevertheless, after years of hard and lonely work, Ding Yi had finally established himself as one of the more important representatives of contemporary Chinese art.

In 1993, Ding traveled to many European countries, and after examining contemporary art practice in the West reconfirmed his idea that a mature artist should maintain and perfect his individual vocabulary. He also realized that contemporary Chinese art had been promoted first in the West, and lacked an audience inside China, a fact that would further alienate the new Chinese art from its domestic background. After coming back from his trip, Ding started to deal with this problem in his art practice.
In 1994, while continuing to work on two-dimensional surfaces, Ding began to experiment with cross paintings on ready-mades. His first object for such experiments was the traditional Chinese folding fan (plate 2.39), a widely used daily object which also functions as an important vehicle of classical Chinese literati culture. As Dematte argued, the presence of painting and calligraphy on both sides of a folding fan and "the very way to unfold it, slowly, from one side to the other," caused the viewer to "perceive it just as a book, to 'read' it and to interpret any component of the codified pictorial language." Now, by covering the fan's surface with crosses, Ding Yi tried to transform this special "book" into an object that contains no historical reading and can be enjoyed by its owner simply for its decorative effect or even practical use. Meanwhile, Ding also painted his crosses on a folding screen (plate 2.40), another common medium for traditional Chinese painting, as well as on such everyday objects of Western origin as telephones and wooden hangers (plates 2.41, 2.42), probably using the latter two for the sake of giving his art a sense of universality and greater appeal to the masses.

In an interview, Ding Yi explained the reasons why he incorporated such traditional Chinese materials as folding fans and folding screens into his Cross Series:

51 Painting and calligraphy started to appear on folding fans as early as the beginning of the Southern Song dynasty in China and became extremely popular during the Ming dynasty. Literati artists frequently painted on folding fans, making them objects of high culture. See Committee of the Palace Museum, *Ming Qing shanmian shuhuaji* 明清扇面書畫集, Beijing, 1985, unpaginated preface.
52 Dematte, "Simplicity," p. 4.
53 According to Catherine Yao, "The Bank of China has issued a paper bag featuring his crosses to be given as a gift to valued customers. This is considered a break-through for Shanghai's art scene, as it is the first time that a powerful entity has given recognition to qianwei art." Catherine Yao, p. 7.
One reason was because these two materials are closer to the life of the ordinary people. Moreover, the original shape of both materials is in complete harmony with my visual forms... Many people saw my folding fans and felt that they were pretty, and thus, they could have a heuristic understanding of this kind of (abstract) painting.\textsuperscript{54}

In 1994 when Ding Yi held his first solo exhibition in the Shanghai Art Museum, he displayed his folding screen and folding fan, both entirely covered with cross patterns, together with his cross paintings. Among his experiments with ready-mades, Ding seemed to be most satisfied with these two traditional genres, since his manipulation of them deconstructed their original cultural functions while retaining their original visual qualities.

It is worth mentioning that during this period Ding was particularly interested in the art of the renowned American graffitist, Keith Haring (1958-1990).\textsuperscript{55} Haring received his training in a mainstream art institute, but he was most interested in "defacing" public spaces (mainly New York City subway platforms) with his semiotic, and later ideographic, language. He also painted on such ready-mades as T-shirts, pottery vases, and fiberglass, attempting to dissolve the boundary between art and everyday life. Although Haring and Ding Yi are very different artists, Haring's concepts and approach were certainly a major influence on Ding's experiments on ready-mades.

However, Ding did not explore this approach any further, since such an open artistic concept led him to a fundamental paradox. He hoped that his art could become an enjoyable part of ordinary people's daily life, but the only effective way to realize his ideal was to transform his works into affordable mass

\textsuperscript{54} Xu Xiaoyu, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{55} In 1993, during his trip to Europe, Ding Yi bought John Gruen's Keith Haring--the authorized biography, published by Prentice Hall Press in New York in 1991. In the same year, I translated the whole book into Chinese at his request.
commodities. Otherwise, as long as they continued to be shown in elitist venues such as galleries and museums, they could never transcend the category of high art. In other words, in order to emancipate his creations from the isolation of high art, he would have to confront their commodity character (an intrinsic part of all contemporary art production) more directly than before and perhaps to the point that he might lose total control over it.56

Ding Yi was certainly aware of this urgent dilemma, discussing it in some detail when interviewed by the critic Xu Xiaoyu 許曉煜 in July of 1996. In the transcription of their conversation, we read:

Xu: How would you feel if a company would like to mass produce your art works?
Ding: This is a very troublesome matter, because I would have to deal with certain commercial system, to negotiate with it, and to control the whole situation. If I would not have the control over the whole situation, it would no longer remain a process of an artistic activity but would become something like, let us say, a designed textile, which probably has nothing to do with art.57

In the same interview, Ding admitted that he had been bothered by this problem a number of times. For example, one carpet company was interested in making rugs based on his cross patterns, and there was a folding screen company that wanted to mass produce his cross screens. "I felt awkward," he confessed, "and I was not sure whether I should co-operate with them or should have nothing to do with this kind of thing. I still have not made up my mind."58

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56 Ding Yi did not totally reject the commercial aspects of art but wanted to sell his works within the high art framework, in which he could control their quality and prices.
57 Xu Xiaoyu, p. 2.
58 Ibid.
The solution to this problem was certainly difficult to find. Ding Yi was not against the idea of combining high art with industrial designs in order to raise the masses' standard of aesthetic judgment, but the great danger of industrial production was that his work might be reduced to a mere manufactured commodity. Yet, even if he rejected industrial production out of hand, he still could not escape the even more insidious problem of how the elitist "high" art world is able to transform even intentionally subversive art like the creations of a Keith Haring into commercial commodities. As most modern artists have learned to their dismay, it is utopian to hope to descend from the airy realm of "high" art into the everyday world of popular appreciation without being transformed into a commodity.

Probably due to this awareness, Ding Yi finally realized that his experiment on ready-mades was a failure.\(^{(59)}\) He then concentrated again on the two-dimensional surface. The works executed since early 1995 reveal his new concerns, which were mainly derived from the paintings themselves. Now Ding started to consider the relationship between his cross paintings and the places they were shown. In his earlier works, he either covered the surface of the canvas (or corrugated paper) completely with cross patterns or confined them within predetermined inner frames. Now, Ding left more spaces around the edges and allowed his brush strokes as well as the tone of the painted area to intrude into the fringes (plates 2.43, 2.44), with the result that the cross patterns were organically interwoven with their settings. In the Aura Aurea Exhibition held in Reggio nell' Emilia, Italy in July, 1995, Ding introduced new cross paintings of this kind to the public, presenting them in groups without outer

\(^{(59)}\) A letter from Song Haidong to me, dated October 26, 1994. In this letter Song stated: "Ding Yi admitted that his experiment on (ready-made) objects was a failure" 丁乙承認物體的實驗失敗.
frames. These paintings interacted visually with one another and were planned to be in total harmony with the surrounding space of the gallery.

The Aura Aurea Exhibition and Ding Yi's solo show in Sicily brought him back to Europe during the summer of 1995, where he stayed for two months, traveling, and seeing the Venice Biennale. After he returned to Shanghai, he continued to make painting the central fact of his life. He forced himself to paint quickly and continuously, producing about one hundred pieces a year. In other words, Ding Yi's art was not merely produced for exhibitions but became a routine practice, a way to realize his need to be alone with himself and away from the tumult of the outside world. In this introspective but open working process, he was also able to free his artistic creation from the trammels of subjectivity, for when chalk and charcoal united with the canvas or with paper, an uncontrollable material power was generated, conferring the painting with a life of its own. As Ding Yi states in his notes on art:

The power of the autonomous nature of art forces the artist to work within the profound logical relationship between the structure of the visual vocabulary and the derived concept. The result reflects the infinite need of realizing the nature and meaning of art itself.60

Both the quantity and quality of Ding Yi's art brought him increasing recognition. From 1995 to 1997, his cross works were featured in almost thirty group shows, most of which were held overseas and were of great importance in the global presentation of contemporary Chinese art. In 1995, the Shang-art Gallery, the first gallery run by a Westerner in Shanghai since 1949, was opened to promote contemporary Chinese art. Ding Yi was one of the first artists

60 Ding Yi, "Chuangzuo zhaji," p. 1.
represented by the gallery, whose work was very soon featured in a solo exhibition. From then on, the Shang-art Gallery became Ding's regular venue for showing and selling his paintings, and the resulting income enabled him to maintain a prosperous, Westernized life style.

However, being a successful gallery artist could by no means satisfy Ding Yi. In the autumn of 1997, he had his second solo exhibition in the Shanghai Art Museum, not an avant-garde venue but one that is dedicated to "serious" art. In the postcard he sent to me in December of that year, Ding wrote:

The effect of my one-man exhibition was quite good. Many people thought it was the best exhibition in the Shanghai Art Museum this year, and I was also quite satisfied to have such a large solo exhibition with sixty-five pieces.

In fact, ever since 1994 Ding Yi's Cross Series has been well received by Chinese official art circles. As mentioned above, as early as 1994, he had his first one-man show in the Shanghai Art Museum, followed by a panel discussion with leading contemporary Shanghai artists about his paintings. In 1995, *Jiangsu Art Monthly* (*Jiangsu huakan 江蘇畫刊*), an authoritative magazine on contemporary Chinese art, published a Chinese-language version of Monica Dematté's article about Ding, providing a high-profile introduction to his artistic practice. During the following years, his cross works were shown in various group exhibitions inside China, including large-scale ones organized by the government. As Xiao Kaiyu 蕭開愚, a contemporary poet, wrote in his...

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61 According to his letter, Ding had already begun selling his works in 1994 to foreigners living in China through a dealer in Beijing. Letter from Ding Yi to me, dated October 8, 1994.
62 In Ding Yi's postcard to me, written on December 21, 1997.
64 For example, in March 1996, Ding Yi became one of the four Shanghai artists who took part in the officially organized First Shanghai...
catalogue essay, Ding Yi's works represent "so-called painterliness, full of free spirituality and natural rich forms," which is "the very thing that our art circles have diligently striven after." When Xiao Kaiyu wrote that, however, he was engaging in sarcasm. On the one hand, he was criticizing Chinese art circles, especially official art institutions, most of the members of which still judge contemporary art work simply according to its visual recognizability, charm, or pleasure, an approach which did not welcome concept-oriented art practices, such as installation and performance art. On the other hand, Xiao meant to warn Ding Yi of the latent danger of being such a well-received painter. As he commented so incisively in the same essay:

Ding Yi's open concepts force him to approach an...original center of art which now has changed into the marginal sphere of non-art occupied by mediocre painting ...The perfection of his art work is actually a powerful hypnosis, the effect of which may keep the artist in his dreamland while the audience is already awake.

Biennial. Four of his paintings were shown and one entered the permanent Shanghai Art Museum collection after the exhibition. Shanghai Art Museum '96 Shanghai Biennale '96上海美術雙年展，Shanghai, 1996.

66 For example, the Chinese government permitted a very high-profile show of paintings by the internationally known British artists George and Gilbert in Beijing and Shanghai in 1993, most likely because of the realism and technological qualities of their art; but the Chinese-language catalogue for the show did not mention anything about the obviously gay content of their creations. one other likely reason was the exorbitant rental fee charged the artists by the China National Art Gallery, the most prestigious official venue in the country. See Jierbote yu Qiaozhi yijiu jiusan nian fanghua zhanlan 吉爾伯特與喬治一九九三年訪華展覽, Beijing and Shanghai, 1993, pp. 6-24. Lynn Macritchie, "Report from Beijing: Precarious Paths on the mainland," Art in America, (March, 1994), p. 51.
In other words, Xiao raised a very classic but urgent issue which Ding Yi had to deal with, that is, how an artist should protect the avant-garde qualities of his works while experiencing commercial success and wide recognition.

Ding Yi was certainly aware of this danger, and he kept on transforming his Cross Series in order to avoid it. In January of 1997 he began painting his crosses directly on the surface of cloths with tartan designs (plates 2.45, 2.46). Previously his cross paintings were ignored and even scorned by some contemporaries because they were said to resemble textiles too closely, a similarity that ironically made his art attractive to many people outside specialized art circles. His utilization of textiles with tartan designs (which I will merely call tartan from here on for the sake of simplicity) was quite likely aimed with a touch of irony at such criticism. By using a homogeneous but highly restrictive background for his cross paintings, Ding created some new technical challenges for himself. Now, before he can even move his brush, he must first observe the different colors and cross designs of each tartan's surface, much as a landscapist needs to scrutinize the landscape he is going to present on his canvas. Only after this process of careful observation can Ding decide what colors and cross structures will correspond to and at the same time dissolve the "landscape" that confronts him on the tartan. The resulting tartan paintings are still characterized by visual richness and harmony, but compared to his previous chalk and charcoal works composed on raw linen or paper, they seem calmer, flatter, and more disciplined. The richly varied variety of his cross patterns is now realized and displayed as a subtle compromise between his creativity and what he is given, an apt metaphor for the artist confronted with external reality.

68 Han Guodong, p. 3.
69 Letter to me from Ding Yi dated March 5, 1997.
Painting the cross is still Ding Yi's way of life, but his tartan painting reveals certain ambiguities that cannot be ignored. By applying thin acrylic on tartan, Ding Yi creates a very fine, smooth, and orderly surface, which, to a large extent, conforms to the industrial nature of his painting materials. At the same time, the subtle undulation created by curved lines in the background, and the brilliant, yet "soft" brush strokes seem to contradict the aura of industrial coolness, dissolving it with tender feelings and abundant personal touches.

Beginning in July 1997, Ding has featured paintings of this kind in shows held in various museums and galleries. They are commonly presented in groups and are frequently monumental in size. By transforming manufactured ready-mades into works of high art and showing them in recognized artistic venues, Ding Yi seems to be gambling with the fate of his Cross Series: Will his paintings be regarded as works of high art or will they be consumed in the way that tartan textiles are? Or will both things happen? Only time can provide the answer.
Chapter Three  Off the Wall: Multimedia Artists

As mentioned in the first chapter, Shanghai artists experimented with performance and installation art as early as 1986. Yet in the second part of the eighties, the early practice of these two new media in Shanghai, (as in other parts of China), mainly functioned as a way to demonstrate the artist's liberation from the domestic tradition and authority. This is proved by the violent, Dadaist, and also crude qualities shared by most of the performances and installations of the period and by the fact that Chinese artists in the 1980s favored performance, a more direct and expressive medium for ideological comment, to installation. The situation was similar in Shanghai. Performances were created occasionally by artists who then returned to painting or literature, and the few installations that they experimented with had strong references to social morality or liberation from orthodoxy.

By the nineties some Shanghai artists, presented with a world of abundant material options and advanced technology, found that painting and sculpture no longer satisfied their expressive needs. Although they had all received a thorough training in those two traditional forms in art school, their enthusiasm for modernity demanded that they go beyond these two "depleted" traditions of art making and establish themselves as professional muti-media artists working in an open and synthetic way.

The two artists whom I will present in this chapter, Shi Yong and Zhou Tiehai, epitomize this category. The works they create frequently utilize various modern technologies, including photography, video, film, and computer. While strongly emphasizing conceptual communication with the audience, their works also stress the refinement, intensity, and sophistication of their personal vocabularies. By working with different media and technologies, both of them
are in close harmony with a metropolitan environment under continuous change, and their art reflects the most urgent issues arising from an era of global communication and consumer-oriented materialism.
Shi Yong 施勇

Born in 1963, Shi Yong belongs to that generation trained by Chinese art institutions during the early 1980s but who led the greatest departure from the Chinese academic tradition in this century. By the time he graduated from the Designing Department of the Shanghai Light Industrial College in 1984, Shi had gained full mastery of Western-style realistic painting techniques. In the second half of the 1980s when the Chinese avant-garde movement began to thrive, and many artists specialized in ideologically oriented installations and shocking performances, Shi remained a bystander or, perhaps more precisely, an observer. This was not just because of his introspective personality, but also because of his strong allegiance to painting during the period. Renting a shabby studio in a farmer's house on the outskirts of Shanghai, Shi kept on practicing and experimenting with his school-learned painting techniques in an attempt to develop an individual style opposed to the academic tradition. Through the limited sources available in exhibition catalogues and magazines, he was exposed to various trends of modern Western painting, Giorgio De Chirico's (1888-1978) mysterious presentations of mundane scenes and romantic fantasies particularly intriguing him.

In one of his few surviving paintings, Sleeper (Keshuizhe 瞌睡者), a piece that was produced in September, 1990 and that won him the first prize in the Third Shanghai Youth Art Exhibition (Disanjie Shanghai qingnian meishu zuopin dazhan 第三届上海青年美术作品大展) held in the Shanghai Art Museum one month later, Shi created his first mature, personal work of art, in spite of his debt to the Italian master (plate 3.1). At first glance, the scene seems to be a mere vignette of ordinary life: a man (actually the artist himself) is sleeping in a clear autumn afternoon. A lady walks by outside his window,
casting a sidelong glance at the interior and the picture's viewer. However, the unnaturally clear imagery, the wraith-like figure of the lady along with the Surrealistic landscape in the background remove Shi's scene from ordinary reality, making it seem more like a deep vision of the sleeper's afternoon dream. From another perspective, Shi's ambiguous shifting between the real and the fantastic seem somewhat static, for the strange lady and the metaphysical outdoors are nothing but components of a painting inside a painting.

The reason why I discuss *Sleeper* in detail here is not just because it is a painting in Shi Yong's individual style, but also because it reveals his great potential for forms of art lying beyond painting. While concerned with the visual effects of his painting and the symbolic meaning of its imagery, Shi also created an open conceptual relationship between his work and the viewer who, after being enticed into his vision, becomes either a voyeur or someone peered at by a voyeur, or possibly both, according to one's way of seeing.

After the June 4th, 1989, which caused a group of artists to flee abroad to escape the government's ideological censorship, the avant-garde art movement in China went into hibernation. In Shanghai, public venues excluded all contemporary art exhibitions; most of the artists began spending the bulk of their time in their studios, more committed to individual research on their artistic vocabularies. During the next four years, studios became the only place where one could produce or see contemporary Shanghai art.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the rural village where Shi Yong's studio was located became the center of a dynamic intellectual circle, since the cheap rent and the rural landscape attracted a group of artists, amateur writers, and rock performers to move there. In this quiet village, Shi was not only able to continue the contemplation of his subconscious and the symbolic meaning of his dreams, but he could also frequently exchange new ideas and information
with a small group of intellectuals. This wide-ranging and stimulating
discussion of art, literature, music, science, and philosophy inevitably
broadened his vision and opened his art to new possibilities.

His *The Last Classical Worship* (Zuīhou yìcì gudianshì de libai 最後一次
classic ritual worship) (plate 3.2), painted in 1991, can be viewed as his departure point
from painting. In this self-portrait, Chirico's strong influence remains
alongside Shi Yong's individualistic touch. In the foreground, one encounters
the image of a hyper-sensitive and anxiety-ridden artist who intends to refuse
reality by withdrawing into Chirico's melancholy settings of spirituality and
otherworldliness. However, the nails hammered into the sides of the frame
evoke a new message, "pinning down," as it were, the sense of self-introspection
and criticism, directed to the withdrawn, fragile psychology of the artist and to
his habit of taking painting as a way to escape reality. In a purely formal sense,
the application of these nails demonstrates the artist's departure from mere two-
dimensional imagery, and as a matter of fact, this self-portrait turned out to be
his last piece on canvas.

Shi Yong's new consciousness of his relationship to external reality may
be interpreted at least partially as a direct response to the rapid changes in the
social environment during the early 1990s. Living in seclusion on the edge of
the city, he could easily discern that the innocent rural landscape was
shrinking day by day, and that his sentimental soliloquy in painting was pale
and lifeless in the face of the approaching shadows of skyscrapers. Thus, how to
step out of his secluded ivory tower and transform the inescapable threats of
industrial society into useful sources for his new art became Shi Yong's most
urgent concern.

In late 1991, Shi started to produce paper works from mixed materials. To
carboard surfaces he attached various objects, ranging from pulled-out cassette
tapes and rusting nails or keys to old calendars, stamped envelopes, or magazine pages, some of which he found by chance on the roadside when wandering through the fields (plate 3.3). If one looks at these works carefully, Shi Yong's soliloquy is still visible in inscriptions that record telephone numbers, addresses, arrow signs, or sometimes spontaneous sentences such as: "I saw a flying saucer" (Kanjian yizhi feidie 看見一只飛碟) (plate 3.4, 3.5). These intuitive personal touches, along with the subtle print marks of objects and the delicate pulled-out cassette tapes, are covered tenderly by a thin layer of transparent plastic membrane in the way that a vegetable field is overlain by plastic sheeting in the winter to guard it from frost (plate 3.6). This covering imbues the surfaces of discarded industrial materials with a feeling of intimacy and protection for fragile human sensitivities.

Shi's paper works have never been shown in any public venue. As his first step beyond the realm of painting, they represented two important transformations. On one hand, all the visual components were carefully arranged by the artist in a way that changed the ugliness of modern waste into beautiful forms. On the other hand, in these works Shi abandoned paintings centered on himself and started to deal directly with everyday materials that embody the rich messages of contemporary urban living. Thus, he was able to transform his humanistic concern, characterized by inwardness and withdrawal in his previous paintings, into an active and conscious observation of external reality.

In June of 1992, Shi Yong introduced photosensitive paper into his paper works, possibly because of the fact that this material slowly changes color during its exposure to light, thus enabling his art to correspond more directly to the real world. After experimenting for more than a year with mixed materials on cardboard, Shi Yong produced his first two installations using this new
material in the autumn of 1993 for the October Experimental Art Exhibition—the
Space of the Post-vanguard (Shiyue yishu shiyanzhan-Houxianfeng de kongjian
十月藝術實驗展—後先鋒的空間) hosted by the Shanghai Huashan Art
Vocational School (Shanghai huashan meishu zhiye xuexiao 上海華山美術職業
學校).\(^1\) Instigated by Shi Yong, Qian Weikang 錢衛康 (b. 1963), and several
other young art instructors in the school, this exhibition gained generous
support from the academy's administrators, and artists were allowed to use the
exhibition space for free. As the first installation show held in an art school in
the 1990s, it demonstrated the relatively loose ideological atmosphere in
Shanghai at the time when Deng Xiaoping's southern tour of early 1992 and his
"endorsement of more economic reform and commercialization had a liberating
effect on art."\(^2\)

The school's exhibition hall was divided into several small spaces, in each
of which a single installation was featured, and the seven participating artists
conceived their art according to this limited, pre-defined arrangement. In Shi

\(^1\) In Gao Minglu's short essay "What is the Chinese avant-garde," he indicated: "When we use the term 'avant-garde' to label the new art that appeared in China beginning in the late 1970s, we do not focus only upon radical novelty in artistic concept and form...Instead, we revive the original meaning of the avant-garde," that is, its "social and political meaning" which "has gradually been mislaid" in the Western art world during this century. Regardless of whether Gao's view on the Western avant-garde art movement is correct or not, it is clear that in the Chinese art world the term "avant-garde" refers to the anti-establishment responsibility of the artist in facing society as a whole. See Gao Minglu, "What is the Chinese avant-garde?" in Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, Fragmented memory—the Chinese avant-garde in exile 被遺
的記憶—中國前衛藝術家四人展, Columbus, Ohio, 1993, pp. 4-5. The term "post-vanguard" used in the title of this installation exhibition suggested a different attitude of these Shanghai artists towards art-making. More precisely, they no longer intended to play the progressive social and political role of the vanguard. Their works featured in this exhibition demonstrated the same idea, since they mainly focused on the inner order of the installation vocabulary and on the sharpening of individual forms and concepts, thus, revealing an attempt to detach art from social and political confrontations. This term also seems to reflect the Post-modernist influence.

Yong's two pieces, video technology and photosensitive paper were utilized both to expand his allotted space through the "reality" of media while at the same time maintaining direct contact between his art and the immediate external reality.

In his *Deviation 15 Degrees* (*Pianyi shiwu du* 偏移15度) (plate 3.7), he set up a transparent fiberglass column with photosensitive paper arranged in a straight line in the center of the space (480 x 373 x 277 cm) meant for this piece. One section of this column departed from the main body, and the photosensitive paper inside it gradually diverged from the central straight line, forming a fifteen-degree angle with it. On top of this section and set at an angle, a monitor showed a video image of part of the main column, thus "replacing" the real object. Around the corner, three cones of photosensitive paper were fixed in a position to form a fifteen-degree angle with the straight line in the center of the space. Here what one experienced was not just the formal rhetoric and the tension between materials and their propositional spaces as found in the other participating artists' works, such as Qian Weikang's *Dividing Into Two Parts Is Still Not Enough* (*Yifenweier rengran bugou* 一分為二仍然不夠) (plate 3.8) and Jin Lili's *Game* (*Youxi* 遊戲) (plate 3.9). One was also enticed into the conceptual interplay set up by Shi Yong between different visual realities, between the fugitive present (signified by the photosensitive paper) and the seemingly eternal past (seen in the recorded image).

Shi Yong's other piece, *Leaning Towards A Supporting Point of Force* (*Xiang yigelidian qingxie* 向一個力點傾斜) (plate 3.10), was inspired by a similar approach and insight: he seemed to create a physical balance between a pile of sliced photosensitive paper and its still image on the monitor screen along with the video recording of another detail of the installation. The synchronization of existence in different spaces and times set up a solid
conceptual foundation on which the audience could form its own interpretation of the piece.

In Shi Yong's first two installations, the subjective expression of the artist seemed to be reduced to the minimum as a result of their scientific execution, industrial refinement, and rational concepts. This reductive inclination became even more obvious in his next works, produced for the show Two Attitudes of Forms 93 --An Experimental Installation Show of Shi Yong and Qian Weikang (Xingxiang de liangci taidu jiusan--Shi Yong, Qiang Weikang zhuangzhi yishu shiyanzhan 形象的兩次態度九三--施勇, 錢喂康裝置藝術實驗展).

In this exhibition which was held in the Huashan Art Vocational School in December of 1993, Shi Yong's three installations took on a Minimalist appearance. However, using photosensitive paper, fiberglass, and pre-set light sources as his vocabulary, Shi engaged his works in constant change due to chemical reaction and color transformation, and in this sense, his installations did not embody the "timelessness and structural stability of Minimalist art," but were more akin to Process Art and very likely influenced by Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and Robert Morris (b. 1931).  

Arnason, pp. 566-7, 571-2. In the early nineties, books on new Western art trends were available to Shanghai artists in Chinese translations. Besides the translation of Arnason's History of modern art (second ed.), Zou Denong 鄭德儉 et al tr., Huihua diaosu jianzhu 輕畫雕塑建築·西方現代藝術史, Tianjin, 1986 (first ed.), there was a series of Chinese translations of more up-to-date Western art practices and theories, published in Shanghai in 1992. They are Robert Hughes, Liu Pingjun 劉萍君 et al tr., Xin yishu di zhennan 新藝術的震撼 (The shock of the new ), Shanghai, 1989; Adrian Henri, Mao Junyan 毛君炎 tr., Zongti yishu 總體藝術 (Total art ), Shanghai, 1990; and Ellen Johnson, Yao Hongxiang 姚宏翔 and Hong Fei 孟飛 tr., Dangdai meiguo yishujia lun yishu 當代美國藝術家論藝術 (American artists on art from 1940 to 1980 ), Shanghai, 1992. At the same time, two important Taiwan art magazines, Xiongshi meishu 雄獅美術 and Yishujia 藝術家, both of which carry rich information on contemporary art practice in the West, were for sale, though expensive and with a small supply of recent issues, in the Shanghai Fine Arts Bookstore 上海藝術書店 located on Fuzhou Road. In the early 1990's, Shi Yong was very much interested in the art of Joseph Beuys and some other conceptual
In *Lifting Objects Five Degrees and Bringing About the Volumes of Shadows* (Wuti taiqi wudu daichu yingzi rongji 物體抬起5度帶出影子容積) (plate 3.11), Shi Yong lifted one side of his fiberglass five degrees off the floor, and then filled the volume of the shadow cast by the fixed spotlight with layers of sliced photosensitive paper. In the other two pieces, *Cutting, Setting Up and Then Filling In* (Qiege, liqi, ranhou tianchong 切割,立起,然後填充) (plate 3.12) and *Partial Volumes of Shadows Interacting* (Yingzi rongji jubu jiaohe 影子容積局部交合) (plate 3.13), the same grammar was applied to connect and activate his vocabulary: the volumes of shadows cast by light sources on objects (the fiberglass) tallied with those of the sliced, filled-in photosensitive paper.

Now the shadow replaced the video image of the object in assuming the same importance as the object itself. Measured in the form of volume and solidified with a kind of material that constantly changed quality and weight, the shadow became both an accurately described element and an element which described things precisely, by indicating the immediate relationship between materials and the sites in which they were located. Seen in this light, it is not difficult for one to determine "the other way" (ling yishong fangshi 另一種方式) sought by the artist. It is a way that "diverges from humanistic references" (tuoli le renwenxing canzhao 脫離了人文性參照) and through which the material and the encountered space are "directly described, but not defined" (bei zhijie de miaoshu er bushi bei dingyi 被直接地描述而不是被定義)."
The installations of the other artist featured in this exhibition, Qian Weikang, manifested the similar objective tendency. In Qian's *Crossing: White Amount 15 grams* (Jiaocha: Baise shuliang 15 ke) (plate 3.14) and *Wind Direction: White Amount 205 grams* (Fengxiang: Baise shuliang 205 ke) (plate 3.15), one saw gypsum powder meticulously weighed out in the quantities indicated in the titles onto the surfaces of iron sheets. Qian's demand for precise physical accuracy seemed rather unrealistic for works executed and shown in an open public space, but his stubborn emphasis on it demonstrated his similar preference for non-subjectivity.

This similarity can certainly be attributed to cross-fertilization between the two artists, who had been good friends since middle school, but more important is the way it underlined their shared insight into attitudes regarding art making as an autonomous activity. By applying physical accuracy to art making, the two artists implied a desire to refine the vocabulary of installation art to an extreme. Especially, in an era dominated by the ideological interests of the Western audience of Chinese art and the operation of an international art market that privileged works of Political Pop and Cynical Realism, Shi's and Qian's objective approach showed an attitude of opposition to prevailing art trends.

As Shi Yong himself explained:

With regard to the artistic tendency, the promise to refuse symbolism and metaphors in art is necessary, since they have been indulged in excessively. To a certain extent, art is an ideology, but the ideology should derive from the work itself.5

5 Ibid.
It is worth pointing out that the "ideology" Shi Yong is talking about here does not necessarily refer to a political criticism of the regime's policies and the overall status quo. Rather the "ideology" is open to any meanings brought forth by the audience's own reading of a work, or as the catalogue of the two-men exhibition states: "With the presence of an audience, the works will become more substantial and more complete."\(^6\)

Shi Yong's (and Qian Weikang's) production of images "that find their only support in a linguistic order as legitimate as it is necessary," and their effort to "neutralize" the meaning of art works to "bring them to the level of the common man" can be described in terms of the "trans-avant-garde" quality of contemporary art, which is discussed by the Italian critic, Achille Bonito Oliva, in his essay "Art Dies Lightly--Keeping Death Alive."\(^7\) This trans-avant-garde quality clearly differentiated Shi Yong and Qian Weikang's installations from those produced in the 1980s by earlier Chinese avant-garde artists, who charged their work with "emotional intensity," and asserted the "superiority and haughtiness" of art in its contact with society.\(^8\)

Although Shi Yong meant to exclude symbolism and metaphors from his work, to some critics, his installations were still abundant in symbolic and metaphorical meanings. For example, in the transparent central column of Shi Yong's *Deviation 15 Degrees*, the critic Zhang Qjng perceived "the contradictory psychology (of the artist) caught between overloaded ambition

\(^6\) Shi Yong and Qian Weikang 錢永康, "Jidian shuoming" 几點說明, in *Xingxiang de liangci taidu jiusan --Shi Yong, Qian Weikang zhuangzhiyishu shiyan zhan* 形象的兩次態度93--施勇 錢永康 裝置藝術實驗展, Shanghai, 1993, unpaginated.


\(^8\) Ibid. Here I appropriate Oliva's words, "superiority and haughtiness," to indicate the exclusivity and elitism of Chinese avant-garde art movements in the 1980's, when the practice of new art was mainly used by artists as an ideological weapon to fight the ruling ideology and to challenge the popular taste of society.
and his fragile and changing reality."\(^9\) Zhang further argued that his contradictory psychology was expressed in the way that Shi Yong destroyed the photosensitive paper by slicing it into numerous small pieces under the light, and then tried to find them shelters by meticulously placing them inside shadows during the fifteen days of the piece's on-the-spot execution.\(^10\) In the view of another art critic, Shao Qi, Shi Yong's and Qian Weikang's installations were seen as "a typical example of urban allergy" (chengshi guominzheng de dianxing yili "城市过敏症"的典型一例) to the lonely, empty, and bewildering life in a big city.\(^11\) As Shao articulated in his article: "The subtle presence of the sensitivity embodied in light and shadow," something "ignored by ninety-nine percent of the audience," and "the fragility that led to the collapse of the balance system (of Qian's work) shortly after the opening" could be viewed as "a blow-up" of city people's "inner sensitivity and their allergic reactions to external reality."\(^12\)

Shao's judgement may seem a bit subjective, but his statements betrayed the fact that most Chinese audiences lacked the experience and sensitivity to appreciate installations of Shi Yong's kind, and that some viewers' total ignorance of installation art even caused damage to some of the works.\(^13\) In

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\(^9\) Zhang Qing, "Shi liangci xingxiang haishi liangci taidu—cong Shanghai <shiyue yishu shiyan zhan--houtianfeng di kongjian> dao <xingxiang di liangci taidu jiusan zhuangzhi yishu shiyan zhan>" 93胡展《两次形象還是兩次態度—從上海〈十月藝術實驗展—後先锋的空間〉到〈形象的兩次態度 93裝置藝術實驗展〉, Hualang 畫廊, 45 (July, 1994), p. 27.

\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Shao Qi, "Siren di min'gan--jiusan Shanghai xiandai huihua de xianxiang zhiyi" 私人的敏感--93上海現代繪畫的現象之一, Shanghai wenhua 上海文化, 4.3 (1994), p. 32.

\(^12\) Ibid.

\(^13\) Shao Qi's mention of "the collapse of the balance system" refers to what happened on the opening day of Shi Yong and Qian Weikang's two-man installation show. As I remember, a large number of people attended the opening. These included students, teachers from the Huashan Art Vocational School, artists and intellectuals, as well as artists' relatives and common friends, most of whom had never been to an installation show before. Shortly after the opening, Qian Weikang's two installations were destroyed due to certain viewers' ignorance. One piece collapsed as a result of being touched by someone who did not...
other words, installations of Shi Yong's sort were generally inaccessible to the Chinese audience, thus, failing to achieve the substantiability and completeness desired by the artist. This fact caused Shi to reconsider the relationship between his installations and their spatial and temporal contexts in the hope of better communicating with his viewer.

In the following installation show, A Phase of Art '94 (Jiusi yishu di duanluo: Zhuangzhi yishuzhan 九四藝術的段落:裝置藝術展) held in the Huashan Art Vocational School in May 1994, Shi's work 480 x 240 x 92 cm, *Relation to a Pillar* (480 x 240 x 92 cm yu zhuzi youguan 與柱子有關) (plate 3.16) revealed a new method of appropriating space. Although the artist used the same materials (fiberglass and photosensitive paper), and still dealt with the interplay between solid and void, along with light and the shadow, this piece differs from his previous installations in that it was no longer confined by a clearly defined space which only contained one piece and had nothing to do with the other exhibited works. Instead, this installation was developed on the basis of appropriating a pillar in the exhibition hall, a dividing element but also a link with the surrounding architecture's space and the viewer's vision. The result is that this work was clearly integrated into its entire surroundings. Meanwhile, its ambiguous position, as both a barrier and as an extension of the architectural and the visual, stimulated a more engaging relationship with the viewer, both conceptually and physically.

As the art critic Zhu Qi 朱其 observed, most of the works (and even the titles of the works) shown by the five instructors and two students from the Huashan Art Vocational School who participated in this exhibition resembled Shi Yong's and Qian Weikang's earlier pieces in their similarity to physics...
experiments.\(^\text{14}\) Yin Jun's 殷俊 *Situation* (Zhuangtai 狀態) (plate 3.17), Tao Huiping's *Change of the Area* (Mianji di bianhua 面積的變化), and Liang Chen's 梁晨 *100cm, Distance* (100cm,juli 距離) (plate 3.18) are just the most obvious examples of this tendency. However, at the same time that Shi Yong's art practice was creating a strong impact on others and leading to the emergence of a "Huashan Installation School," his fresh approach to space implied a new departure point for his growing concern over the "validity of the installation for the artist or for the viewer," a question simultaneously broached by Zhu Qi from the perspective of art criticism.\(^\text{15}\)

After this transitional piece, Shi Yong introduced a great change into his artistic practice, making communication with audiences and contact with external reality the premise and kernel of his work. On November 26th, 1994, he created a piece called *City Space: Moving-leaping 12 Hours* (Chengshi kongjian: Yidong tiaoyue shier xiaoshi 城市空間, 移動跳躍十二小時) (plate 3.19) for an art event entitled "Agreed on November 26th As A Reason" (Tong yi shiyiyue ershiliu ri zuowei liyou 同意11月26日作爲理由). This event, initiated by the Hangzhou artists Geng Jianyi and Wang Qiang 王强 was realized by ten participating artists who made art works on the same day in three different cities, Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. Afterwards, they reproduced their works on postcards to document their activities and to circulate as a special exhibition.

On the chosen day, Shi Yong walked within the Shanghai urban area for twelve hours, following a spontaneous itinerary based on his telephone communications with friends. After leaving his studio at 8:00 A. M., he called a friend in the first public telephone booth which he found on the way chosen by

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\(^{15}\) Ibid.
his cameraman. After the artist explained his activity to the first person he called, the latter decided a route on which the artist would find the second public telephone booth to call the next friend in accordance with certain pre-set rules. This activity continued until 8:00 P. M., and it was finally presented in the form of Shi Yong's written instructions, the photographic record of the event, and a map of the itinerary.

In this documented performance, the artist obviously made communication "both the content and the form" through which his work gradually arrived at its conclusion. The written instructions still relate this piece to Shi's previous matter-of-fact experiments, in which the random or necessary, rather than the artist's subjectivity, played a major role in shaping the final results. Yet, the fact that Shi Yong moved his art directly into an open space and the way that he used telephone communication, a major component of urban living, to adjust the direction of his maneuvers through the city transformed this piece into "a remarkable example" of contemporary people's neccessary renegotiation of a constantly shifting urban environment.

If "penetrating space rather than conquering time," as Oliva argued, is the major concern and characteristic of contemporary art, then Shi Yong's action of traversing the city space fits perfectly into the critic's definition of "contemporariety." Seen in this light, his Amplification Site: a Cross Echo in a Private Living Space (Kuoyin xianchang: Yige siren shenghuo kongjian di jiaocha huisheng 擴音現場:一個私人生活空間的交叉回聲) (plate 3.20), can be viewed as another example of the same concern. This piece was produced for

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16 A letter to me from Shi Yong dated December 3, 1994.
the second Hangzhou-Shanghai-Beijing collaborative art event, named "45 Degrees as A Reason" (45 du zuoweiliyou 45度作為理由).

In March, 1995, Shi Yong transformed his new studio, a one-bedroom apartment, into a piece of art work. The artist set up transparent plastic membranes in his living room and bedroom, close to the surfaces of which were suspended a number of loudspeakers. Microphones were located throughout the apartment, and whenever the toilet was flushed, the washing machine ran, the television was on, or the artist was cooking in his kitchen and talking with friends, the sounds were transmitted by the many microphones to the amplifier and mixer, and then to the loudspeakers, causing the membranes to vibrate.

For the first time Shi Yong had allowed his art to penetrate into a private urban living space, and now the trivial activities of daily life became both the engine and amplified content of his work. His transformation of banal, trifling everyday life into an organic entity of sound and vision which, in turn, drew further attention to the banality of mundane existence, can be viewed as an immediate confrontation and negotiation between art and life. One may interpret this piece metaphorically as another reaction to "urban allergy," in the way that it attempts to penetrate into the individual's psychological space shaped by a big city full of alienation, or, as Wu Liang suggested, it may be taken as a piece that deals with the "metamorphosis" (bianyi 变異) of daily life and "anxiety over invasion" (bei ruqin de jiaolü 被入侵的焦慮) caused by the takeover of technology. No matter how this work is interpreted, it proves Shi Yong's post-avantgarde attitude towards art making, that is, to create art that is neutral and open to diverse possibilities.

20 According to Wu Liang, Shi Yong said: "It (refering to 45 degrees) is neutral, and embodies unfixed and various possibilities" 它(指45度)是中性的,具有非確定的可能性. See Ibid.
In May 1995, Shi Yong had his first overseas exhibition in Vancouver, Canada. Hosted in the Access Gallery, an artist-run center, this exhibition, entitled "Not Here Not There," featured two installations, one by Shi Yong and the other by Qian Weikang, both of which were realized through the physical participation and involvement of the audience. Inside the gallery, Qian used a large blue plastic tarpaulin to construct a corridor paved with scales. When one walked through the piece, which he named *Gravity Corridor* (*Zhongli zoulang* 重力走廊), the light turned on and off alternatively as a result of the viewer's contact with the scales. Qian's corridor still allowed the viewer to decide whether or not he/she would enter it, Shi Yong's *Appropriating the Site: Body, Sound and Image* (*Jieyong xianchang: Shenti, shengyin, ying xiang* 價用現場: 身體,聲音,影像), however, did not give the viewer this freedom, since as soon as he entered the gallery space, he automatically became a part of it (plate 3.21).

Shi installed a moving surveillance camera at the entrance to the showing space to keep close watch on the audience, transmitting each person's image onto a monitor screen set up in one show window in front of the showing space. The artist covered the glass in another show window with a black plastic membrane, putting loudspeakers close to its surface. When the audience talked and moved inside the showing space or walked across Qian Weikang's *Gravity Corridor*, microphones, which Shi had set here and there, collected the sound. The sound then went through an amplifier and finally reached the loudspeakers, causing the membrane in the show window to vibrate. It is interesting to mention that Shi Yong even used the storage room next to the gallery's entrance, perhaps for the first time in the history of Access. An inflatable plastic bag installed inside it was blown up gradually by viewers who stepped on a pump serving as the staircase leading to the membrane-covered
show window, thus connecting the storage room and the window via human activity.

Human participation was essential to the completion of Shi Yong's art in this piece. Yet the participants now were not merely the artist himself and his close friends, but included any viewer, Chinese or Western, who happened to walk into the gallery. The participation of non-Chinese viewers was particularly instructive for Shi, because he found that their different cultural perspective enriched his work with new interpretations and issues beyond his previous ideas. In addition, his first experience of making art in the West corrected his earlier assumption that Western artists do not need to concern themselves with the limiting conditions that frequently confront Chinese artists creating media art. In this piece, he started with an ambitious plan of great technological complexity, but after arriving in Canada, he had to constantly adapt his work to limits imposed by budget, the gallery's space, and the availability of equipment, finally realizing his earlier concept in a more flexible and spontaneous way.

His cross-cultural experiences led Shi Yong to new insights into art making, both with regard to its position in various cultural contexts and to its technical realization under limited conditions. In his first letter to me after this exhibition, he wrote:

21 At that time, Shi Yong's interest in penetrating the showing space through technological networking and his total utilization of human activities were for the most part connected with his interest in the linguistic exploration of installation art as a new medium. He did not intend to charge his work with any political connotations, especially when contemporary Chinese art practice made strong efforts to challenge the regime. During the artist's talk in Access Gallery, however, Shi Yong work was largely discussed in a political context which involved various issues deriving from a Western perspective, including such questions as the violation of human rights and freedom as well as the disorientation of human beings in a technological age. Although this discussion made Shi Yong's work more complete by enriching its meaning, it also caused him to think about the position of his art within different cultural contexts.
Limited conditions [for art making] are not just a problem in developing countries but also exist in Western society, which is subjected to the government's policy of cutting cultural budgets. This means that art may adopt a more economical, small-scale, and flexible way to realize a concept (which is actually of the greatest importance)... In short, the trip to Vancouver had a tremendous impact on me.22

During the remainder of 1995, Shi Yong did not make any new work. He kept on thinking about this problem of limits while he was engaged in earning money to support his art. After deeper reflection, he realized:

The limitation itself is not merely an economic issue, but also involves a system, namely, involving the problem of limits created by another specific kind of ideology. And this is the characteristic cultural situation in our country.23

Here one determines a big shift in Shi Yong's artistic perspective. He seemed to be accepting Marxist ideas about the dialectical relationship between the economic basis and the superstructure, an idea that he must have been exposed to in his Chinese middle-school textbooks. Now for him economic limitations reflected ideological limits. In his letter, Shi Yong did not clarify what his "another specific ideology" referred to. Since he mentioned "the characteristic cultural situation" in China, it may be assumed that he was talking about the Communist ideology. However, I would like to argue that for Shi Yong, an artist who had being involved in various commercial projects in money-oriented Shanghai, capitalist ideology was a more important concern. In addition, we should not ignore the fact that even Communist ideology in China, especially, in

22 Shi Yong's letter to me dated July 7, 1995.
23 Shi Yong's letter to me dated January 29, 1996.
Shanghai was going through a process of great transformation under the influence of the increasingly capitalistic economic structure of society.

But one may ask: what were the reasons for the profound change in Shi Yong's perspective? And what did this change mean to his subsequent art practice? Answering these questions is certainly very important for us for understanding his new artistic concepts and approaches during the most recent stages of his career.

Shi Yong's first experience of working with the Western artists from artist run centers like Access was certainly a major factor in these changes. As Shi Yong himself mentioned in the letter just quoted above, in Vancouver he realized that although artists in the West are not subject to the same kinds of ideological prohibitions that ones in Communist countries are, their work is still limited by the ways in which capitalist ideology determines how society's resources are to be spent (or in the case of many artists, not spent). In this sense, the limitations of capitalist ideology create common issues for both Western and Chinese artists, and studying these issues through his art might very well help Shi Yong to build up a new international dialogue with the West.

To a great extent, Shi's new insight can also be attributed to his increasing interest in the post-modernist discourse, which has become more popular in Chinese intellectual circles since the middle 1990s. In an age when art in general has shifted from interest in stylistic originality and formal innovation to treatment of its cultural-political context, he seemed to be following the mainstream practice initiated in the West, i.e., using art as a method to establish and validate the identity and social position of a marginal cultural community. Thus, his study and exploration of the constraints of both the economic basis and the superstructure caused him to begin examining the effect of Western capitalist ideology, the ruling ideology in the contemporary art
world, on Chinese artists. By doing that, he could locate and define his own identity and position in the future artistic dialogue with the West.

In short, from 1996, how to manoeuvre within limited conditions became Shi Yong's new concern. He decided to employ the most feasible and economic way to have his art function more effectively on the ideological level.

His *Please Do Not Touch* "Please Do Not Touch" (Qing wu chumo"Qing wu chumo") (plate 3.22), a piece presented in the installation exhibition Under The Name of Art-- Contemporary Chinese Art Exchange Exhibition (Yi yishu di mingyi—Zhongguo dangdai yishu jiaoliu zhan 以藝術的名義--中國當代藝術交流展), which was held in the Shanghai Liu Haisu Art Museum (Shanghai Liu Haisu meishuguan 上海劉海粟美術館) of Shanghai in March, 1996, can be seen as his first step in this new direction. In this piece, the technical complexity, which had been such a dominant feature in Shi Yong's previous installations, disappeared. What one saw was merely the Chinese words, Qing wu chumo 請勿觸摸 ("Please do not touch") written in red neon lights. These were arranged on the floor, and when one walked within a certain distance of these words, an alarm system set up by Shi sounded, just as it would if one had touched a masterpiece in a museum.

Here the audience's involvement was still indispensable to complete the expression of Shi's concept. However, the relation between the audience and his work no longer simply remained a linguistic structure through which the artist pursued the self-sufficiency of his installation art. Rather it functioned more as an immediate reference to the ideological framework in which art has been shaped, positioned, and justified. Let us see why and how.

It is obvious that on the semantic level "Please Do Not Touch" is a common taboo confronting audiences inside museums and galleries, both of which function as the "showrooms" of art history. Shi Yong's witty citation of this
taboo very likely alluded to the paradoxical nature of art history, especially, the history of modern art. Perhaps he is suggesting that this is basically a history of breaking taboos, but at the same time a history of constantly transforming the fruits of taboo-breaking actions into new taboos. For example, Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973) utilization of non-mainstream cultures such as Black African art and Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) transformation of taboo objects like urinals into art works enriched art history by leading it in new directions. However, these subversive art works became untouchable taboos themselves as soon as they were accepted and valued by a tolerant art world and dealers with a sharp sense of smell. Now by making the sign Please Do Not Touch, which originally had no artistic meaning and value inside mainstream art venues, into a legitimately exhibited art work, Shi Yong seemed to follow Picasso and Duchamp, trying to further expand the capacity of art through his own appropriation of taboos. Furthermore, by setting up an alarm system which kept the audience outside certain limits, Shi Yong changed his prohibition-art work into a tabooed object, thus assuming that his work had achieved a certain status in the context of the art world. In this sense, he was giving a live performance of one act in the evolution of modern art history.

24 According to Pierre Daix, "Picasso was not the first to have thought of renewing painting by delving into primitive art, but he was certainly the first to formulate the problem in technical and aesthetic rather than moral terms." See Pierre Daix, *Picasso*, London, 1995, p. 63. Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) is a good example of incorporating African sculpture and so-called "primitive" Romanesque Catalan painting into his work, which disconcerted and scandalized the mainstream art world of his age. For this work, see ibid., p. 60. Besides Picasso, Marcel Duchamp is another iconoclastic figure who introduced even greater change into modern art history. In 1917, Duchamp submitted his most notorious ready-made *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal signed by the artist with R. Mutt, to the exhibition of the New York Society of Independent Artists. Although this entry was rejected by the hanging committee of this exhibition, it was replicated later in a number of copies and was accepted by the modern art world as another classic piece. See Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston Mcshine ed., *Marcel Duchamp*, New York and Philadelphia, 1973, p. 282-3, and Arnason, p.229.
which now is more closely related to the packaging and promotion method of the capitalist market economy.

Seen in his own cultural context, Shi's self-affirmation and self-elevation can also be viewed as a projection of the paradoxical psychology of contemporary Chinese artists, who are confronted by a modern art history dominated by Western practice and ideology and when their art is commonly legitimizined first and, in many cases, only in the West. Here Shi Yong not only expressed his (and other Chinese artists') wish to be validated in the Western-dominated art world, but at the same time seemed to mock the whole process and system of this validation.

While dealing consciously with current cultural situations in his art, Shi Yong also determined to give up his identity as solely an installation artist, allowing himself to use any possible methods to realize his artistic concepts.25 This change is apparent first of all in the technical simplicity of all his works produced since 1996. Secondly, it is demonstrated by the fact that from 1996 Shi Yong became more and more obsessed with the idea of casting himself as an actor, thereby endowing his art with a strong sense of performance.

In 1996, Zhang Qing curated a medium exhibition, entitled Passing the Plane (Chuanyue pingmian 穿越平面) which was published in the fourth issue of Gallery Magazine that year. Six Shanghai artists purchased three pages in the issue of the magazine to show photographs of their new works.26 As one of the participating artists, Shi Yong used computer technology to create A Plan for an Image Survey (Xingxiang zhengqiu jihua 形象詰求計劃) (plate 3.23). What one sees in this "survey" are frontal portraits of the artist with twelve different computer-designed hair styles. In the text explaining the survey, Shi Yong

25 Ibid.
expressed his urgent desire for a fresh image with the statement that he wished to "keep in step with a new era" (gengshang shidai de bufa 跟上時代的步伐) when social reform deepens and global communication becomes more frequent.  

However, further on in the text he explained that, due to his declining analytical capability, he had to turn to the viewer to help him decide the right image which can "both maintain his individuality and at the same time reflect the spirit of the new age."  

This time Shi Yong positioned his art directly on the stage of contemporary Chinese social life by examining how an artist can forge a new identity in an indigenous cultural environment undergoing constant change due to globalization. Unlike the art performances seen in 1980s China, Shi Yong's work did not intend to create a strong impact on the audience through any emotional or physical stimulation. Rather it adopted a welcoming attitude, allowing the audience to play a decisive role in determining the "spirit of the new age." To a high degree, this dramatic abdication of responsibility on Shi Yong's part also reflected his ironic perception of the artist's role and of the function of art in the contemporary social and cultural milieu. Art now has no power to influence and change society. Contrarily, it is meaningful only as a cultural performance of the contemporary drama tied with the tastes and lives of the masses, a characteristic prevalent in the other industries of a consumer-oriented society. Accordingly, the artist is no longer superior to his audience, but rather becomes a public character with various simultaneous personae and is just as bewildered or slick as others in society.  

Shi Yong's daily life was also characterized by multiple roles. In order to support himself and his art, he had been involved in various commercial projects, the most important of which was designing and overseeing the  

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27 See text in plate 3.23.  
28 Ibid.
construction of the largest discotheque in Shanghai (and one of the biggest in the world) during the first half of 1996. No longer was he merely an artist and art teacher. As a successful commercial designer, Shi played the role of a sophisticated social being. He gradually endowed himself with various personalities in order to adapt to the highly commercialized and complex metropolitan environment. This process of adaptation changed Shi Yong's personality and also changed his general view of art. Art no longer seemed sacred, and art-making became a vocation. By relying on the strategies and intelligence of the artist, his art aimed for the maximum possible validity and legitimacy under limiting conditions.

To be sure, no Chinese artist, art critic, or theoretician is allowed to ignore Western political and cultural ideologies, when it comes to legitimizing or validating contemporary Chinese art. Up to the present, these offer the major stage on which such processes can take place, thus heavily influencing the orientation and development of Chinese art. With this observation, one can easily understand the reason why since the summer of 1996 Shi Yong has conceived his art within a context of international communication. By identifying his works with performances or props on the international art stage, he has attempted to expose the still unhealthy nature of the post-Cold War exchange between the West and China in the art world.

His *An Art Sample from China* (*Laizi zhongguo di yishu yangpin* 來自中國的藝術樣品), which was produced in August, 1996, is the first piece that deals directly with this problem. It is simply composed of a luggage cart, on top of which lies a transparent suitcase with luggage tags from the customs of various Western countries. Inside the suitcase hangs a Chinese costume, half Mao jacket made from a red material, the other half a traditional jacket made from Chinese
rice paper. Each side of the costume has a label, one in English and one in Chinese, reading, "Made In China." Shi Yong explanation of this piece reads:

... a well designed and finely tailored item of clothing considered typically Chinese according to Western ethnocentric views can safely become a privileged source symbolizing the situation and identity, (and it is the new taxonomy of culture created under the name of Western muticulturalism that is privileging this symbol).29

Now this symbol seemed to be presented in another privileged situation, i.e., as an object that by going through customs would be ready to enter the spotlight of the overseas stage, where Western stereotypes would accept and justify its existence. Seen in this light, the transparent suitcase no longer remained absurd. On the contrary, it functioned as a perfect "window" for utilizing the ruling ideology to claim wittily the legitimacy and privilege of Shi Yong's sample of indigenous art.30 Here the artist's dual criticism was self-evident. On the one hand, he was attacking the West for its superficial judgment of other cultures by stereotyped cultural and political ideas. For example, many Westerners still associate Chinese culture narrowly with chopsticks, tea, rice paper, or more recently, with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. They do not realize that definitions of tradition and culture are under constant flux and regeneration.

On the other hand, Shi Yong is also making a parody of current contemporary Chinese art practice, which frequently utilizes the strategy of exporting indigenous cultural products to the West to gain favor with Western audiences. Some Chinese artists attempt to legitimize their work by playing with traditional Chinese materials or philosophical concepts in an attempt to pander

29 Shi Yong's manuscript about this piece, written in August, 1996.
30 Ibid.
to foreigners' demands and/or tastes. In other words, they portray themselves not in their real form but in the form of the other's other. Yet Shi Yong questioned this kind of art practice by using the same materials and stereotypes of the artists he attacked, a paradox that is best described by Shi Yong's own ironic statement-question in his explication of the piece: "This is the reality of cultural exchange of marginal cultures guaranteed by Western multiculturalism."

A similar paradoxical approach can be seen in the works Shi Yong produced in the summer of 1997. For example, his thirty-minute audio-video piece *Who is the Performer?* (Shei shi biaoyanzhe 誰是表演者) (plate 3.24) displayed two scenes in alternation, the first consisting of a palm moving horizontally and vertically on the screen, and the second a blurred female face moving back and forth in the action of kissing the screen. This piece was realized in an unusual way, for the artist actually did not allow the objects he filmed (i.e., the hand and the face) to move but instead shifted the video camera back and forth to create a sensation of motion. If the relation between the objects he shot and the camera lens could be understood as that between the performer and his stage (or audiences), then, Shi Yong's deliberate exchange of the character of the former and the latter was certainly another metaphor (though much more subtle in this case) for the reality of interchange between contemporary Chinese art and Western ideologies on the international stage.

During the same period, Shi Yong also produced an installation called *To Live 'Elsewhere'* (Shenghuo zai 'biechu' 生活在'別處') for 97' Contemporary Shanghai Art Exhibition (97' 上海當代藝術展), held in the cultural center of Shanghai's Changning 長寧 district in August, 1997 (plate 3.25). This time Shi Yong put an old suitcase used by a traveler against a wall, on which he had
attached some empty quotation marks made from paper, cleverly suggesting to his viewers the once popular saying "to live elsewhere." He also placed a conference table and chairs in the center of the exhibition hall, symbolizing the center of authority in the art world. During the exhibition, a speaker hidden in a hole in the center of the table and connected to a tape-recorder and an amplifier inside the suitcase, played the sentence "I refuse" again and again.

Here Shi Yong carried on his analysis of the current cultural reality. However, his criticism was directed even more at the paradoxical nature of criticism itself, or as he wrote:

In the present reality fraught with verbal strategy and media operations, the suitcase, which once symbolized a spiritual journey,... now exists merely as a cultural performance, which fictionalizes the spiritual departure by providing for it a stage, a prop, or a performer. When the spiritual symbol tries to be away from and to refuse the problematic center of authority in a calm manner, its voice, however, has never left nor intends to leave the site of this center of authority.

By setting up a stage full of spiritual melodrama, Shi Yong expressed his total distrust of the so-called spirituality involved in contemporary art practice. In an age when criticism of Western cultural hegemony became a popular and sometimes heated discourse among Chinese art theoreticians, critics, and artists, most of whom were influenced directly or indirectly by the Orientalism studies initiated and developed in the Western academic world, Shi Yong’s lingering

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32 This derives from Milan Kundera’s novel, Peter Kussi tr., Life is elsewhere, New York, 1974. The Chinese title of this novel is Shenghuo zai biechu. Chinese translations of several important novels by Milan Kundera were published in Beijing during the later eighties and early nineties. Shi Yong and Qian Weikang bought these translations and discussed Milan Kundera’s novels frequently with literary friends in the early nineties in Shi Yong’s village studio.

33 Shi Yong’s manuscript about this piece, written in August, 1997.
voice of refusal was more like "a double-edged sword" (shuangrenjian 雙刃劍).\textsuperscript{34} It cut sharply in both directions; that is, it attacked both the problematic outside reality and the equally problematic reality of the art criticism itself, a criticism which was motivated by the desire to be accepted in the West by engaging in a further Western discourse.

It is worth mentioning that in the spring of 1997 Shi Yong had the chance to go to the Vermont Studio Center as an artist in residence. He spent one month in Vermont but did not find the place very exciting due to its lack of a cosmopolitan atmosphere. After that, he headed for New York and then traveled in other parts of the United States for a couple of weeks. His second trip to the West caused him to think further about his role and position as a contemporary artist from Shanghai in the front line of global communication. Although the art world no longer seemed as innocent as it had before, it still charmed him, since he treated it as a glamorous and challenging stage on which a courageous artist could use his wisdom and intelligence to win applause for his performances while at the same time maintaining his sense of humor.

In the autumn of 1997, Shi Yong put his survey of \textit{The New Image of Shanghai Today} on the Internet, the most effective medium for global communication.\textsuperscript{35} As a result, individuals from all over the world (but mainly from Western countries) participated in the activity of choosing the best hair style and costume for the artist. Besides the previous criteria he set up for his initial image survey, Shi Yong now also requires the person surveyed to choose a new image for him which can be "most convincing for international communication."\textsuperscript{36} By inviting his viewers to answer the question: "In today's China, what kind of new image do you think can play an important role on the

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Please visit the website http://www.shanghart.com, and open Shi Yong.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
stage of international communications?" he presents himself as a leading
color character on the international stage.37

Besides giving himself media exposure on the Internet, Shi Yong also
sought to set off his performance against the most effective background for
highlighting his self-image on the stage of international communication. He
conceived a project *The International Version of the VIS project: the New Image
of Shanghai Today --Image Advertising, Presentation and Selling* (<Jinri
Shanghai xin xingxiang> 'VIS' jihua guoji jiaoliu ban--Xingxiang guanggao
zhanshi yu cuxiao 〈今日上海新形象'VIS'計劃國際交流版--形象廣告,展示與
促銷〉) for the traveling exhibition Cities on the Move, which was held in Vienna
in November of 1997 to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Vienna
Secession. In this work, one finds the new self-image that Shi created by
combining the most-favored hair style and costume chosen by his Internet
survey arranged against seven new city sites of Shanghai, including the Bund,
the Pearl of the Orient Television Tower in Pudong, the main Metro station, and
the overpass in the downtown area. By connecting his new image directly with
these new images of Shanghai, a city considered by many to be a new world
center of economic and cultural exchange, Shi portrays himself as a prominent
figure performing with the eyes of the world upon him.

In this ongoing project, the artist plans to make his self-image located in
front of these famous Shanghai city sites into posters, postcards, and illuminated
billboards. They will be presented and sold in various public spaces, retail
shops, major squares in big cities around the world, and also inside museums and
art galleries. Shi Yong's project also includes detailed plans for selling the
objects created so that his new image can be put on the global market. Here one
may notice that what Shi Yong hopes to carry out is very similar to what Andy

37 Ibid.
Warhol did during the 1970s. By making his own image the subject of his art and by promoting it with popular methods in a commercial society, Shi is seconding Warhol's idea that an artist should seek stardom like a celebrity, a way to assure the function of art in contemporary consumers' society. Yet at the same time, much like Warhol, he is mocking the whole process by which one becomes a star, with the difference that the celebrity images of Chinese artists are created in most cases by an audience outside China.

Shi Yong attempts to approach a large audience by means of self-promotion and self-packaging, but he is also aware of the existence of more sophisticated audiences who are influenced by their knowledge of art history and who possess the verbal capacity to shape art history both at the present and in the future. Thus, in Shi Yong's *Adding One Concept on Top of Another* (*Zai yige gainian shang zai jia yige gainian* 在一個概念上再加一個概念) (plate 3.26), a conceptual piece featured in Vancouver's Grunt Gallery as part of the city-wide exhibition Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River in the spring of 1998 and shown recently in Plug In Gallery in Winnipeg, the conspicuous appropriation of a classic of modern Western art history is used by him as a postmodernist strategy to validate his expression of the self in the context of the other. The starting point for this piece is Joseph Kosuth's (b. 1945) *One and Three Chairs*, a established conceptual work of contemporary art. Following Kosuth's format precisely, Shi Yong's work is composed of (1) a

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38 Andy Warhol associated with many wealthy and powerful figures in society and frequently incorporated images of celebrities into his art work. In the sixties and seventies, he was also involved in film, video and publication industries, exposing his own image to the public. See John O'Connor and Benjamin Liu, *Unseen Warhol*, New York, 1996. Arnason, p. 469.

39 Kosuth's original piece consisted of (1) a photograph of a chair, (2) a real chair, and (3) a text with a standard dictionary definition of the word "chair." See the illustration in Joseph Kosuth, *Art after philosophy and after* (collected writings by Joseph Kosuth, 1966-1990), Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991, fig. 6.
color photograph showing him sitting on a replica of Kosuth's chair with the hair style and clothing selected by his Internet survey, (2) an object (a real replica of Kosuth's chair) and the same image of the artist projected on top of it by means of a video projector, and (3) a text, which specifies the concept of what it means to be a contemporary Chinese with both his physical features and cultural identity shaped and accepted by the present age of globalization. By adding an image of a contemporary Chinese selected by the Internet to a legitimized concept symbolizing Western verbal power, Shi Yong's performance once again evoked the East-West discourse. He seemed to be attempting to validate his work for sophisticated viewers familiar with modern art history, while at the same time commenting on the predicament of contemporary Chinese artists and art in a Western-dominated world. And once more he was sitting in the center of the stage, in this case on Kosuth's chair!

During the exhibition, some Western viewers raised the question of why it was necessary for Shi Yong to appropriate Kosuth's piece rather than create his own original work, but if they were willing to look into the reasons for this carefully, they would be well on their way to understanding a crucial facet of contemporary Chinese art.
Zhou Tiehai 周鐵海

Three years younger than Shi Yong, Zhou Tiehai is the Shanghai-based multimedia artist most active in the international art circles of this decade. As one will notice in the following discussion, Zhou's art is similar to Shi Yong's work since 1996, in that it deals systematically with the problematic cultural reality confronting contemporary Chinese artists in a decade of rapid globalization and commercialization. What distinguishes Zhou from his contemporaries are his urbane and witty art vocabularies that expose the reality of art world and his paradoxical strategies that have enabled him to position himself and to validate his art within the same reality he is criticizing.

Born in the later sixties, Zhou belongs to the generation that for the most part was too young to be much involved in the avant-garde art movements of the early eighties in China. However, his aggressive personality made him a bold participant rather than a witness in that decade, in spite of his youth. A study of Chinese art history in the eighties reveals that he was one of the few individuals from his age group who strove side by side with those of the older generation for ideological liberation and new artistic expression.

Any study of Zhou's earlier artistic practice can hardly neglect Yang Xu 楊旭 (b. 1967), another bold young art student of the time, who produced art together with Zhou from 1985 up until 1991. In 1985 and 1986, Zhou and Yang worked together for the first time as a team, creating a group of large-scale graffiti on used newspaper. As Zhou recollected later, the first piece was named *The Wall Newspaper of New Life* (*Xin shenghuo qiangbao* 新生活牆報), but the title was ambiguous when pronounced in the Shanghai dialect and could also be interpreted as *The Wall Newspaper of Sex Life* (*Xing shenghuo qiangbao* 性生活牆報). In this work the two artists painted popular media personalities of the
time and wrote various newspaper slogans and titles, such as "More Rats in China than Human Beings" (Zhongguo de laoshu hi ren duo 中國的老鼠比人多) and "Typhoon Arrives" (taifeng lailin 颱風來臨). Although none of these early paintings survive, they are still worth mentioning, since they were the first newspaper paintings Zhou was involved with in his attempt to build a direct connection between his art and social reality.

Zhou's and Yang's first public (and also the most famous) collaboration was a ten-minute performance called The Sense of Violence (Baoli gan 暴力感), which was presented as the final piece of the M Art Group performance exhibition held in Shanghai in December of 1986. As suggested by its title, this collaboration involved a good deal of violence and other disturbing activities. Both artists went onto the stage completely naked, and Zhou was whipped by a person holding a branch, while two persons grabbed Yang by his shoulders at the same time another person pricked his back violently with needles. Yang shouted loudly in Chinese: "Nietzsche is dead! I am the Nietzsche of China!" In 1986, presenting a performance of this sort on stage demanded extraordinary courage and a thoroughly rebellious young heart. Zhou and Yang's shocking physical involvement in this performance clearly demonstrated their emancipation from the restrictions of the Chinese cultural tradition and ruling orthodoxy. Moreover, by claiming that Nietzsche was dead they also intended to subvert the twentieth-century Western value system established upon Nietzsche's premise that God is dead. According to Gao Minglu, this performance pushed the "anti-art" theme of this group show to "the level of being totally

40 My interview with Zhou Tiehai conducted in his studio on August 12, 1997. In the Shanghai dialect, the word for "new" and "sex" have virtually the same pronunciation, and Zhou and Yang were consciously using the word as a pun in the piece's title.

opposed to civilization and was anti-culture.\textsuperscript{42} In other words, their piece can be seen as the climax to the most radical performance event held before the 1989-China/Avant-garde exhibition.

As untrammelled young men, Zhou and Yang were certainly interested in exploring new visual vocabularies in an attempt to oppose artistic conventions. In 1989, when both of them were studying at the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University, they produced their first set of installation works, \textit{Chair Series} (\textit{Yizi xilie} 椅子係列). The surviving visual record of the piece shows that it consisted of simple wooden chairs, but with seats made from the wooden chopping blocks used in Chinese kitchens. Compared with the visually stimulating and politically provocative installations mentioned in most studies of the Chinese avant-garde movement of the age, Zhou's and Yang's \textit{Chair Series} may have seemed too simple and quiet to be of great historical significance. Yet when seen within the context of Zhou's personal artistic development, these installations are extraordinary, since I believe that they adumbrate a subject that he has been treating constantly in his art during the 1990s. The chair has been central to a number of highly important modern art works, such as Joseph Beuys's \textit{Chair with Fat} (1963), Kosuth's \textit{One and Three Chairs} (1965) and Warhol's \textit{Electric Chair} (1965).\textsuperscript{43} One can argue that the use of the chair in modern art is at least partially related to its value as a symbol for authority and extension of the central concepts of a social system or ideology. Although it is hard to prove to what extent Zhou and Yang were conscious of what the chair symbolized to modern artists in 1989, we cannot escape the fact that Zhou's later practice constantly focuses on the conflict in the art world between the

\textsuperscript{43} For Joseph Beuys' \textit{Chair with Fat}, see Alain Borer, Lothar Schirmer ed., \textit{The essential Joseph Beuys}, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997, plate 83. For Andy Warhol's \textit{Electric Chair}, see the illustration in John O'Connor and Benjamin Liu, p. 48.
authorized and the unauthorized or the chooser and the chosen, and it is quite possible that Zhou and Yang's *Chair Series* was an early visualization of their awareness of the art world's power struggles.

As mentioned in the first chapter, a contemporary art exhibition, the Garage Show, took place in Shanghai in November of 1991. One of the major impetuses for this exhibition was to present works for a visiting Japanese art critic, Chiba Shigeo (b. 1946), who was at that time a researcher in the Toyoko Museum of Modern Art and was interested in introducing contemporary Chinese art to his country. At that time, Zhou and Yang had just graduated from art college; but due to their participation in the M Art Group show, one of their *Chair Series* and three of their large graffiti pieces created in 1989 were accepted for exhibition by the senior artists curating the Garage Show, some of whom were the leading members of the M Art Group. Yet just before the opening, Zhou and Yang's works were excluded because of disagreements with some senior artists about the number of works to be shown. This unforeseen event was a great disillusionment for these two enthusiastic but callow youths. They suddenly realized that the art world is not as pure as they had imagined, since it is also contaminated by the hierarchy, competition, and selfishness typical of the rest of the world. As an angry response to their disappointment, Zhou and Yang soon produced five graffiti, which they called *Cultural Revolution Series* (*Wenge xilie文革係列*) and which were also painted directly on large surfaces made by joining newspapers together.

In the first two pieces of this series, *Break* (*Juelie決裂*) (plate 3.27) and *The Knife Needs Sharpening* (*Daofeng bumo rensheng xiu刀锋不磨人生修*) (plate 3.28), one could hardly miss that the two artists had intentionally appropriated the form and language of so-called big character posters (*dazibao大字報*), the wall newspapers of the Cultural Revolution period, the qualities of
which were combined with poor handwriting, childish brushstrokes, and
clumsy Western figures derived from paintings in the Louvre. According to the
critic Li Pingxin 李平心, Zhou and Yang seemed to create "a second Cultural
Revolution" (dierci Wenge 第二次文革) in their studio by "projecting their
dissatisfaction onto the surface of the discarded newspaper."44 The vehement
emotions and conflict expressed in these works were striking, for they
successfully combined politically provocative language with blunt and vigorous
visual renditions.

In these two graffiti, those who understand Chinese would easily find not
only familiar catchwords from the Cultural Revolution period but also specific
phrases used by the Chinese government during its campaigns against
"bourgeois liberalism" in the 1980s. In Break, one sees such sentences as:

During recent years, capitalist views on art and life have been rampant...Art has already
reached the stage of being manipulated at will by the bourgeois reactionaries. Thus we
have to break completely with modernism and post-modernism.45

In the second piece, the artists wrote:

Aim the spearhead of struggle at the bourgeois class... Create all kinds of images to help
the masses propel history forward.46

According to what Xiaomei Chen tells us in her discussion of "official
Occidentalism," such ideas were originally advanced by the Chinese government

44 Li Pingxin 李平心, "Huashizhong di huajia—guanyu Shanghai qianwei
meishu de diyi xianchang" 畫室中的畫家--關於上海前衛美術的第一現場, Yishu
chaoliu 藝術潮流, 2.2 (February, 1993), pp. 98-102.
45 For the Chinese text, see Appendix p. 189.
46 For the Chinese text, see Appendix p. 189.
in an attempt to oppress political opponents at home, thus, consolidating its domination of domestic politics.\textsuperscript{47} Now by using these anti-Western and anti-bourgeois sentences in their paintings, Zhou and Yang seemed to be superficially supporting the position of the government, which in previous decades had constantly oppressed the practice of modern art by charging that it is a product of corrupt Western bourgeois ideology.\textsuperscript{48} Yet it is hardly necessary to point out that Zhou's and Yang's motivation in using the government's language was certainly different from that of the authorities. Indeed, Zhou and Yang provide an interesting example of Xiaomei Chen's argument that Chinese Occidentalism is "a discourse that has been evoked by various and competing groups within Chinese society for a variety of different ends."\textsuperscript{49} More precisely, the voice of the government's anti-Western and anti-bourgeois campaigns, evoked by two frustrated young artists in their westernized painting, was now being employed to resist one group of privileged senior artists who, though strongly allied with Western ideology, were seen as a ruling force suppressing the emergence of the younger art generation at home. As the art critic, Qianzi 乾子, pointed out:

In Zhou Tiehai and Yang Xu's work, there are criticisms directed at the hypocrisy of contemporary culture and art practice together with the pursuit of spirituality aimed at fighting for one's own rights.\textsuperscript{50}


\textsuperscript{48} As Lauk'ung Chan informs us: "New forms other than socialist realism have been categorized as 'bourgeois art' (before 1980), as being 'spiritually contaminated' (in 1983), and as 'bourgeois liberalization' (since 1989)." Lauk'ung Chan, "Ten years of the Chinese avantgarde--wwaiting for the curtain to fall," \textit{Flash art}, 25.162 (January/February, 1992), p. 110.

\textsuperscript{49} Xiaomei Chen, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{50} Qianzi 乾子, "Minzhong di jingshen liliang--Zhou Tiehai he Yang Xu di yishu" 民衆的精神力量--周鐵海和楊旭的藝術, in Zhao Bing 趙冰 ed., \textit{Duoyuan}}
The reason why I have employed the theory of Occidentalism in my discussion of these graffiti is not because I am very interested in the theory itself, but rather because I would like to emphasize the fact that from the very beginning, Zhou Tiehai has used art in a very political way. His art is political because his major motive in conceiving and creating it is, as my later discussion will prove, to fight the forces that dominate the contemporary art world, while at the same time obtaining recognition and power in the same world by means of strategy.

In the *Cultural Revolution Series*, Zhou and Yang were not just concerned with claiming their rights in the domestic art world, they also paid attention to the development of a consumer culture, which from 1991 onwards began to cause tremendous changes in Chinese society. In the other three graffiti of the series, we notice that the tension of opposition is considerably less. The aggressive language of the Red Guard and the stereotyped proletarian figures of the big character posters give way to more spontaneous collages constructed from a kaleidoscope of images and playful sentences derived from news media, commercials, and daily urban life of the contemporary world. One sees a French noble having his hair dressed in *Duke Dan'nuo* (*Dan'nuo gongjue* 丹諾公爵) (plate 3.29), a Western lady juxtaposed with Poison perfume in *The Pot Is Broken, the Water Is Gone* (*Hupo shuijin* 壺破水盡) (plate 3.30), and a fairy-tale image painted side by side with a Chinese boss making his fortune in Japan in *Rein in at the Brink of the Precipice* (*Xuanya lema* 懸崖勒馬) (plate 3.31). Even if one cannot understand the Chinese text, these grotesque and gaudy visions, rich in the imagery of the consumer culture, unfold a picture of a society full of material temptations and chaotic bewilderment.

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*zhuyi--nuoyong di celüe* 多元主義--挪用的策略, Changsha, 1992, p. 9, in *Dangdai yishu xilie congshu* <當代藝術>系列叢書, no. 4.
We have to admit that the social environment of Shanghai during the early nineties was not very conducive to the development of young artists' careers. On one hand, due to political and economic limitations, contemporary Shanghai artists had very few opportunities to exhibit their works. On the other, the commercialization of Chinese society caused people to doubt the socialist value system in general and begin challenging the "spiritual" side of art-making which had been at the center of the avant-garde movements during the 1980s. Under these circumstances, Zhou's and Yang's artistic collaboration came to an end; and after 1991 Yang became an interior designer. After similar disillusioning experiences, Zhou lost interest in contemporary Chinese art, and during the years 1992 and 1993 he did not produce any works, making his living as an independent film and video producer in Shanghai.

Yet during those two years, contemporary art in China changed at a pace commensurate with the country's rapid economic reform and opening to the West. Less strict ideological control inside China, fast economic growth, and multicultural policies in Western countries encouraged the Western media and art world to start "discovering" contemporary Chinese art, though mainly as a post Cold-War phenomenon. The year 1993 was particularly critical. In that year, the showing of Political Pop art and Cynical Realist painting in the Hanart Gallery in Hong Kong caused an upsurge of enthusiasm for Chinese art in the Western world, and Chinese artists started to be chosen to participate in various prestigious international exhibitions. It was against this new social and cultural background that Zhou Tiehai resumed his career as a contemporary Chinese artist.

In 1994, after returning from a stay of several months in New York, Zhou resumed his art activities by producing a wall-sized painting on the surface of

51 Here "the spiritual side of art-making" refers to non-material pursuits in the process of artistic creation.
wrapping paper, *There Came a Mr. Solomon to China--Having a Bath with the Critics* (Zhongguo laile ge suoluomen--he pinglunjia tong xizao) (plate 3.32). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first documented work that Zhou created independently. Obviously, its large size, crude materials, and use of a collage of roughly-done images and bad penmanship betrayed its stylistic continuity with those newspaper graffiti that Zhou had produced together with Yang Xu. Yet in spite of these similarities, the individuality of Zhou's new work was equally evident. Unlike the graffiti that he produced together with Yang Xu, the surface of the new piece was much less crowded. By arranging relatively simple elements in a more orderly way, Zhou was obviously attempting to focus the viewer's attention on certain subject matter, rather than keep his eye busy with details. Since Zhou's work is frequently related to his experiences in the art world or in the daily reality of Shanghai, it is vital to understand these elements in his creations, if we wish to understand them. In this piece, the background is supplied by both the title and the painting's Chinese text:

His majesty, the great Mr. Solomon, did not consider one thousand *li* too far, for he braved the wind and waves and arrived in China. His bright piercing eyes gaze from north to south into the hearts of people in peripheral regions.52

The" Mr. Solomon" in this passage is Andrew Solomon, a journalist specializing in art reportage and author of a book on Russian art just before the downfall of Communism.53 The *New York Times* sent him to China in 1993 to write about contemporary Chinese art, an event alluded to by the name on the boat in this

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52 See the text in plate 3.32.
painting. At the end of that same year, he published an article entitled "Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China" in the *New York Times Magazine*, which introduced contemporary Chinese art practice to Western audiences mainly from a political standpoint. Zhou met Solomon twice before he created this painting, once in Shanghai in 1993 and the other time in New York in 1994. This experience of having contact with a representative of Western media who was interested in contemporary Chinese art strongly influenced Zhou's return to the art world.

In this particular painting, Zhou was narrating a true story. The exaggeratedly humble tone he used to describe Mr. Solomon, a Western explorer of contemporary Chinese art, revealed his acute observation of a new and obvious unbalanced relationship between a curious center and the "peripheral" area the former had chosen for study. By creating a picture of artists taking a bath with the critics, Zhou fully exposed one of those facts of the early 1990s that Chinese artists rarely discussed, namely, that when a very few art critics and curators in China became the sole channel through which the Western media and art world obtained lists of contemporary Chinese artists "worthy" of attention, many artists engaged in a secret and highly treacherous contest to cultivate better personal relationships with those domestic authorities and jockey for exposure in the West. Thus, once again Zhou Tiehai's subject was the power struggle in the art world, but the change in that struggle suggested by his new work hints at a possible reason for him rejoining the ranks of artists at this time. When contemporary Chinese art moved to the Western stage, the shift of power from authorities in domestic art circles to Western journalists, museum directors, gallery curators, and so forth challenged its previous hierarchy.

Thus, a new period had now arrived, a period when young Chinese artists would

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have the opportunity to compete with their senior colleagues on a level playing field.

Encouraged by this new situation, Zhou resumed his activities as an artist. Besides the piece just mentioned, he produced a group of large-size wrapping-paper paintings in 1994, works which both commented on the new cultural situation conditioned by the East-West relationship in addition to criticizing the consumer culture of the era. A typical example is *Shanghai: Asia's Top City of the Future* (plate 3.33), in which Zhou covered a huge surface with a patchwork of pages from books on cultural criticism and art theory. On the top of the painting, a prominent line of Chinese text reads: "The famous prostitutes of the late Qing Dynasty were the fashion models of the masses" 溫末名妓衣著入時乃是大衆模仿之對像. Underneath this sentence, one sees a computer-processed photographic image of a famous late Qing prostitute which had appeared in a recently published Chinese book about early twentieth-century Shanghai popular culture, a work that like many other similar publications nostalgically glorified the city's past as a commercial and economic center. Now by confronting the audience with both this past image and a current question: "Shanghai: Asia's Top City in the Future?" Zhou was able to juxtapose and draw parallels between two related fragments of Shanghai history, thus, exposing the immoral, ugly, and greedy exchanges involved in an increasingly materialistic Shanghai society in the process of restoring its past glory and position in the world.

55 See plate 3.33.
56 See Tang Zhenchang 唐振常 ed., *Jindai Shanghai fanhua lu* 近代上海繁華錄, Hongkong, 1993, pp. 218, 223, photograph 70. The main line in Chinese on this painting also derives from the same book. The original sentence is "清末上海的妓女是社交界的名星,衣著趨時,其打扮亦為普羅大衆模仿的對象." See Ibid., p. 251. For a similar example, see Shi Meiding 許梅定 ed., *Zhuiyi--jindai Shanghai tushi* 遺憶--近代上海圖史, Shanghai, 1996.
To be sure, it is not correct to say that attacking Shanghai’s consumer society is all that this piece is about, since Zhou’s criticism of elite cultural practice in contemporary China is easily discernible in the remaining Chinese text, especially, in the sentence written below the main line in Chinese, which reads: "Are Temptress Moon and Shanghai Triad... very interesting!!" (Feng yue, Yao a yao, yaodao waipo qiao... hen you yisi ma?! <風月>, <搖啊搖, 搖到外婆橋>...很有意思嗎?!) Here Zhou alludes to two films directed by Chen Kaige 陳凱歌 and Zhang Yimou 張藝謀 respectively, the two Chinese directors most favored by Western viewers. A new "Shanghai fever" had brought about the publication of numerous books about the city during the early twentieth century, and these two films can also be seen as symptoms of the same malady. The stories of both take place against the background of Shanghai gangster societies in the 1920s and, even more than the books, tend to pander to the Western (and domestic) audience's interest in the mysterious old Shanghai fraught with sex and violence, crime and intrigue, and the ever-present possibility of a swift ascent to riches and power. Now by questioning the quality of these two films, it can be argued that Zhou Tiehai is not just criticizing them in isolation but that he is also attacking the habitually over-simplified way in which Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou present Chinese history and society for the sake of appealing to the Western audience, with its fascination for stereotypes about China and exotica in general.57 However, when Zhou questioned the

57 Zhou Tiehai's view is similar to what one finds in the writings of other Chinese intellectuals. See Wang Yichuan's 王一川 discussion of the differences between the Western reception of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou as opposed to its reception of the "Fourth-Generation" Chinese directors. In his article Wang analyses the strategies used by both Zhang and Chen for producing Chinese films liked by Westerners and criticizes both for lacking "responsibility to history" and for their "anxiety of crisis." He also attacks them for using "allegorical Chineseness" to attract Western audiences. Wang Yichuan 王一川, "Yuyanxing zhongguo qingdiao--Zhang Yimo yu disidai" 寓言型中國情調--張藝謀與第四代, in Wang Meng, Jinri xianfeng (2), 1994, pp. 77-85.
unbalanced cultural communication between the West as center and China as 
fringe, his own presentation of Shanghai as a seductive and exotic oriental 
prostitute, fell into the same category which he claimed was uninteresting and 
problematic. In this sense, his criticism (or possibly implied self-criticism) 
became an integral part of his self-posturing strategy.

Squeezed between a commercialized metropolitan life style and the acute 
consciousness of an intellectual, Zhou, like many Shanghai artists, developed a 
schizoid frame of mind. He called himself a "yuppie-hippie" (yaxipi 雅嬉皮), a 
term that indicates the contradiction between the materialistic and spiritual 
sides of his life. Besides attacking the Western cultural hegemony and the 
relevant problems it caused for contemporary Chinese culture, Zhou soon 
lifted an ambiguous engagement with materialism. His Our Paintings Should 
Be Packed in Louis Vuitton Luggage (Women de hua yaoyong Louis Vuitton di 
bao lai zhuang 我們的畫要用Louis Vuitton的包來裝), which was made in 1994, 
can be viewed as an early example of this new development (plate 3.34). In this 
painting, one sees contemporary Chinese art works packed in a piece of name-
brand luggage on their way to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. 
This time the artist may have been trying to give the same weight to the 
financial and cultural value of art works, or perhaps he was attempting to mock 
the inseparability of the two values as the operation of the art world suggests. 
Though different viewers might read the work differently, it is clear that 
materialism not only remained a critical subject in Zhou's art but also was 
treated as a new force that interfered with and shaped his way of being an 
artist.

In 1995 Zhou started to employ computer techniques to make slick-
looking fake covers of important Western news and art magazines, on which his 
own image or his paintings, originally done on cheap, crude materials, were
highlighted. The first piece he finished in this series was a *Newsweek* cover, on which the image of Zhou as a yuppie was set against the background of his painting *The Knife Needs to be Sharpened*, an earlier graffiti work full of revolutionary spirit. The English headline on the cover, written in white block letters, reads: "Too Materialistic, Too Spiritualized," a perfect visualization of the artist's schizoid mentality (plate 3.35). As Hou Hanru pointed out, the artist "engaged in the fantasy of being a media star or the fantasy of self-transformation into a rich and famous person," thus reflecting the materialistic desires "shared by many young urban Chinese of his generation."58 Yet at the same time, as a young man who had been born with a rebellious nature and intellectual consciousness, Zhou could not give up his love for the pursuit of the spiritual life he had experienced during the avant-garde art movements of the 1980s. The artist's inner struggle was painful and sincere, but his sense of irony was also unmistakable in the way that he transferred the crudity, social criticism, and anti-commercialism of his original painting onto the highly finished surface of a magazine cover with the express purpose of self-promotion. The irony was also manifested in the glamorous and dramatic way that he presented his most personal introspection and inner conflict and at the same time "put into gear a formidable public-relations machine that reflected Zhou's march to international fame."59 This fake cover later became one of his most representative works and has been featured frequently in the European art world.

Here a little story which Zhou told Mishi Saran in an interview originally published in *The Asian Wall Street Journal* may help us understand the background to his fake magazine covers. During his three-month trip to New

58 Hou Hanru, "Globalized, chaotic, empty, dystopian," p. 147.
York in 1994, an acquaintance familiar with Chinese artists asked Zhou: "How come I haven't heard about you?" and: "How much does your work cost?" These two questions shattered Zhou's earlier artistic naivété, and he admitted to Saran:

Before, I thought to be an artist, all you need is your work to be good... I suddenly discovered that was not the case. You have to be on the list.60

As we have seen in our discussion of Zhou's There Came a Mr. Solomon, at the beginning of the 1990s, the "list" was mainly in the hands of a few Chinese critics then. However, by 1995, when contemporary Chinese art was already known to Western audiences and collectors, being on the list of various Western curators and dealers became a test of one's artistic creativity, but perhaps even more of one's skill at "navigating a treacherous web of relations with gallery owners, museum curators, writers and, yes, other artists."61 Now by featuring himself on one of the world's most powerful media covers, albeit a fake one, Zhou was expressing the necessity of being "on the list" in the contemporary art world and was putting himself on the list!

In addition to the Newsweek cover, Zhou also produced an Art News cover during this period (plate 3.36). Besides reflecting the conflict between the commercial and non-material present in the Newsweek cover, this work also treated the difficult situation confronting Chinese artists of this decade. Due to the almost total lack of a domestic audience and support from the Chinese government, most Chinese artists have been forced to show their art outside the country. Since the major Western art magazines are the most effective and powerful medium through which Chinese artists can become widely recognized

61 Ibid.
by Western audiences and then become famous inside domestic art circles, being on their covers is obviously a fantasy shared by many Chinese artists. Thus, Zhou’s \textit{Art News} both criticizes the difficulties faced by Chinese artists in their homeland, while at the same time exposing their ill-concealed eagerness to be accepted by the West.

At the same time as he was making these fake magazine covers, Zhou also produced his second set of large-scale paintings, most of which combined painted images with computer-generated fake magazine covers and which expressed his sense of regret about the disappearance of authentic personal feelings among people in Shanghai. For example, in \textit{We Cannot Afford It} (\textit{Women fudan buqi 我們負擔不起}) (plate 3.37), we see an enlarged fake cover of \textit{Vogue} magazine, featuring a group of the most famous Shanghai prostitutes of the 1920s arranged at the center of the work and separating a contemporary young couple on its two sides. The picture of the prostitutes, the alienation between the man and woman, as well as the artist's claim that: "We cannot afford it," and: "We do not have peace of mind" (我們心里不踏實) allude to the indifference and anxiety always present in contemporary Shanghai life, where true love has been diminished and contaminated by lucre.\footnote{See the text in plate 3.37.}

In his \textit{We Went to Look for Love} (\textit{Women xunzhao aiqing qule 我們尋找愛情去了}) (plate 3.38), made in 1996, the same message was delivered in a more straightforward way. Here Zhou portrays two Joe Camels (originally an advertising icon for Camel cigarettes) as dandyish and somewhat wicked city-slickers, who like the artist himself went looking for love in Shanghai. Their sense of ultimate frustration in this quest is expressed by the Chinese sentence written in small characters under the painting's title, which states that they "cannot find good love, and they cannot live without it, but if it is found, they
will give themselves more trouble" (haode zhaobudao, meiyou you shoubuliao, youle you rang ni fangde budeliao 好的找不到, 没有又受不了, 有了又讓你煩得不得了). As Zhou realized from his personal experience, love needs to be cultivated by money in Shanghai.

This same idea is also expressed by the fake Newsweek cover collaged in both a black-and-white and color version onto the lefthand side of this painting, the English headline of which reads: "Where to Find Love in Shanghai." The cover shows a common scene in Shanghai, a young couple without money or a private apartment, who can only date on the street at night. Here the artist's anxious desire for true love and his feeling of loss are expressed in a unique visual rendition full of bitter playfulness. The contradiction between Zhou's yuppie interest in material power, symbolized by the slick Joe Camel, and his longing for personal fulfillment, seen in the loving couple dating on the street, once again suggest the schizoid mentality which he shares with many young Shanghainese. In paintings like this, one glimpses one of the few moments when Zhou shifts his attention from the problems of the art world to the reality of daily life. 64

In 1996, Zhou started to use sound in his art. In the installation show Under the Name of Art, the second exhibition in which he participated during the 1990s (the same exhibition that showed Shi Yong's Please Do Not Touch "Please Do Not Touch," ) Zhou presented his first sound piece, called Airport (Jichang 機場). During the whole opening day of this exhibition, as the audience walked around the exhibition hall to see the installations made by

63 See the text in plate 3.38.
64 It is interesting to point out that Zhou was not the painter of these paintings, since they were realized by his assistant according to his ideas and designs. In this sense, he cast himself as a conceptual artist, more precisely, a director whose intellectual sophistication and talent became the brain behind these highly individualized and impressive visual presentations.
fifteen other participating artists, they could constantly hear Zhou's airport announcement recorded on a tape. After a professional announcer reported the departure times of different flights to such Western cities where contemporary Chinese art had been shown as Venice, Berlin, Brisbane, and Vancouver, the audience was told:

Dear passengers, we are sorry to inform everyone that due to bad weather flight LF1170 to Kassel will be delayed in its departure. We will keep you informed about the departure time. Thank you.65

At that time the Documenta Exhibition in Kassel, Germany was the only internationally prestigious art event in which Chinese contemporary art had not yet been featured. In this simple sound piece, Zhou transformed the exhibition hall into an airport departure lounge and the audience, many of whom were artists, into passengers waiting anxiously for the flight to Kassel. Here Zhou's ironic view of the business side of the art world was clear beyond words, for idealism and ambition under the banner of art became a synonym for human vanity and crass materialism.

In 1997, Zhou's art started being shown outside China, and his career as a successful artist began. This was partly due to the efforts of his agent since 1996, the Shangart Gallery, an organization that initiated a fruitful connection between Shanghai artists and Western (especially European) collectors, dealers, curators and art lovers. At the same time, Zhou's good command of English allowed him to associate with a wide range of foreign friends dwelling in Shanghai, including consuls and cultural attachés from different European

countries, and his many social contacts, together with the uniqueness of his art, enabled him to enter various venues in the Western world. Yet the more Zhou succeeded in his career in the art world, the more he became obsessed with the problems he experienced as a contemporary Chinese artist.

In March of 1997, Zhou was invited by the famous Japanese curator Shimizu Toshio to have an exhibition in Tokyo with two other internationally established artists, Sone Yu from Japan and Ch’oe Chonghwa from Korea. Zhou produced two pieces for this exhibition, the third part of a large show, Promenade in Asia. One of his works was a large-scale painting, named Are You Lonely? (Ni gudu?) (plate 3.39). In this piece Joe Camel once again catches the viewer's eye with a halo over his head on which are written the English words: "GLORY SPLENDOR WEALTH RANK" (rong hua fu gui) obviously referring to all the wonderful things in this world that success in the art business can bring one. These four English words are, however, contradicted by the eye-catching Chinese characters "你孤独", which according to Zhou himself, imply that "even if arriving in Kassel, you will also be lonely" (jiushi daole Kasai'er, ye gudu). The melancholy appearance of the apparently successful Joe Camel expresses the same bitterness of spiritual loss deep inside the artist.

If this painting communicated Zhou’s inner struggle and pessimistic view of the art world's reality in a concrete and amusing way, then the other piece he produced for the same exhibition startled the viewer with its extremely blunt text. This second piece consisted of a nineteen-minute black- and-white silent

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66 Here I do not intend to say that Zhou is merely a social opportunist. At a time when there is hardly any support from the domestic audience or the government, self-promotion and clever, or even opportunistic, social manoeuvres, (which are omnipresent in the contemporary art world), become necessary for Zhou Tiehai and his compatriots to establish their artistic careers.

67 See the text in plate 3.39.

movie, which presented three minutes of black screen, then thirteen minutes of the English word WILL alternating with its Chinese synonym Bixu 必须, then one minute of the English text FAREWELL ART!, alternating with its Chinese translation Zaijian yishu 再见吧艺术!, and then two minutes of film credits (plate 3.40-43). This little "melodrama" can best be viewed as another eye-catching and creative vision produced by the artist to catch the attention of the audience, but it also showed its viewers a portrait of the conflict between the artist as an ambitious warrior pursuing worldly success and his spiritual disillusionment with the art world as another battleground for business.

Two months later, Zhou participated in one more group exhibition, entitled Another Long March, held in the Dutch city Breda. According to the exhibition coordinator Tang Di 汤荻's report, this was the first big exhibition in the West featuring conceptual art from mainland China with eighteen artists from Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Guangzhou and Lanzhou participating. For this show, which was held in an abandoned military barracks, Zhou presented a simple sound piece, consisting of such bugle calls as reveille and taps, which were played to the audience as they filed through the exhibition hall. This piece, which ostensibly alluded to the title of the exhibition, may have reminded viewers of the cultural long march taken by contemporary Chinese art under exceedingly difficult circumstances, but Zhou probably intended to comment on the business side of art, too, or as he once said: "Artists are like soldiers. Whether they like it or not, they have to obey the rules and have to keep on fighting." Since China has became increasingly capitalistic during this decade, the battle he was talking about was more likely to be an individual struggle for personal success, and the rules that the artist must obey refer, more

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70 My interview with Zhou on May 29, 1998.
or less, to the compromise of one's "spirituality" and personal principles in order to obtain material prosperity.

In this piece, Zhou blew his bugle like a valiant warrior, but his demand for spirituality in the art world soon presented his viewers with a completely different vision. In November of 1997, he was chosen to participate in the exhibition Cities On The Move in Vienna. For this show, Zhou produced another conceptual piece, consisting of a black flag flying from the top of the exhibition building, on which were emblazoned the two Latin words "Vale Arte" ("Farewell Art") written in white letters. During the opening of the exhibition, Zhou had the two curators lower the flag to half mast and keep it there until the show was closed. This piece also appeared later on a fake cover of The New York Times Magazine dated November 30, 1997 (plate 3.44). Now instead of being a disciplined soldier fighting for victory in the art world, Zhou despairingly proclaimed the death of art on the part of an individual whose idealistic view of art as a purely spiritual and noble social activity was crushed by the operation of an art system which, as Oliva observed: "in our time has become a force that both guarantees and limits the artist's existential freedom." Paradoxically, Zhou's farewell to art was not expressed by some suicidal gesture as seen frequently in earlier art history, nor through the demise of his artistic career. On the contrary, his assertion that art is dead remained another creative action performed in the art system to supply its continuous demand for objects of the imagination. In other words, by constantly involving himself in the repetitive and creative process of "assuring vitality to the definition of art," he further asserted his survival and identity as an ambitious artist.72

72 Ibid.
Thus, no matter whether Zhou presented himself as a warrior for or gravedigger of art, he was, to a large extent, doing so as a strategy to validate his work in an art world mainly dominated by Western perspectives and a globalized economy. As his most recent works show us, the more directly he confronted those dominant forces in the art world, the more he was able to create attention and admiration for both his art and himself.

The cultural section of the February, 1998 issue of the Swiss news magazine *Facts* carried a report about Zhou's exhibition in Bern at that time.73 This article showed a picture of Zhou's fake cover of *Facts* magazine, on which the artist presented himself as the alleged murderer of a Swiss journalist (plate 3.45). According to the author, Zhou's cover, which he had enlarged to show in the Bern exhibition, was inspired by reading an earlier story in the magazine about a Swiss man who had been accused of murdering someone in China. Although similar in technique to his earlier fake magazine covers, this new piece was an even more radical act of the imagination, for by casting himself as the murderer of a Western journalist, Zhou was consciously subverting the Western media's overwhelming capacity for shaping the reception of contemporary Chinese art in the West and influencing its development in its indigenous context. Yet, it is impossible to miss the ironic fact that Zhou's radical gesture of negating the power of the Western media made him once again a Western media star.

In March of 1998, Zhou participated in another group show in Vancouver, Canada. For this exhibition, he produced a piece entitle *Press Conference* (Xinwen fabuhui 新聞發布會) which consisted of three life-size photographs, in which he remained the glamorous central figure (plate 3.46). This time he acted the statesman, claiming that "relations in the art world are the same as the

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relation between states in the post Cold War era."Meanwhile, he also listed himself as a newly issued stock on the Shanghai Stock Exchange Market. As the text of the financial report incorporated into this piece indicated, Zhou Tiehai, a newly listed stock, appreciated among overseas investors, its value mainly under the control of European buyers (plate 3.47). Here Zhou was commenting on the power relationships within the international art world, especially between Shanghai and the West. He seemed to suggest that in an age of globalization the reality of cultural communication on the international stage is mainly determined by economic relations between nations, and, to a large extent, the position of an artist in the art system is related to, and judged by, the value of his works on the global cultural market. As Oliva wrote: "...the notion of success seems less a question of passing into history than of ranging through geography. Criteria of time and immortality have been replaced by space and ubiquitous presence on the international art circuit."75

As a matter of fact, in 1998 Zhou's art was featured in more than ten overseas exhibitions. At the end of that year, he won the first prize of the first Contemporary Chinese Art Award set up by a Swiss art foundation and was recently selected to take part in the 1999 Venice Biennale. We can see that within an extremely short period he has established himself as the most internationally active and best-known multimedia artist residing in Shanghai. Now by issuing himself as a stock Zhou was merely reaffirming this idea of his immediate value as a global "commodity," which passes into the space but lacks historical depth. In the text of this piece, one reads:

74 See the text in the middle image in plate 3.46.
75 Achille Oliva, "Why have artists stopped committing suicide," p. 90.
If the Zhou climbs much higher it will find itself very vulnerable to market fluctuations and exposed to the whims of profit-takers," said a market analyst with a Shanghai-based securities firm.76

We are not certain if the "Shanghai-based securities firm" is some Chinese critic or (more likely) Zhou himself, but in any case he is expressing anxiety about how the whims of speculators will influence his future value. However, in spite of his concerns, his "fundamentals remain sound, and bullish traders expect renewed interest by overseas buyers to bring Zhou Tiehai higher in the long term."77 Thus, as long as he continues to produce objects of the imagination, the art world, now mainly Western, will continue to affirm his value.

76 See plate 3.47.
77 Ibid.
Chapter Four  Dynamism in Disunity

The light and color of the nineties are getting more ambiguous. While the aura of radicalism still remains, this age combines banality, hedonism, kitsch, and utopia, and only in this way does art carry richer meanings.1

Zhu Qi

Change and Disunity

In China, the 1990s were a decade of tremendous social transformation. The communist regime's Western-influenced economic reform and the rapid growth of a global consumer culture created a capitalist-socialist society. The Chinese people's unified political idealism of previous decades faded away and was replaced by the individual's endeavour to survive and prosper in a constantly shifting social structure.

Contemporary art practice in China experienced a similar transformation. As Gao Minglu wrote in a recent essay: "The grand subject matter and utopian vision" of Chinese avant-garde art during the 1980s have changed into the individual's "more cynical or mundane approach" to "real situations" in this decade.2

In Shanghai, an increasingly capitalistic city at the front line of China's economic and cultural encounter with the West, the self-centered perspective on, and interest in, making art became increasingly characteristic in the nineties. Art became more "a production determined by multiple pressures,

1 Zhu Qi, "Yishu zuowei yizhong mingyi—Shanghai 'Zhongguo dangdai yishu jiaoliu zhan' baodao" 藝術作為一種名義—上海 '中國當代藝術交流展' 報導, Hualang, 55.2 (February, 1996), p. 27.
including the state, the market, mass culture, international institutions, and so on," rather than "a pure ideological and cultural production." ³ Under the influence of diverse inner motives and external pressures, art in Shanghai displayed a great disunity during this decade. This existed in three areas: (1) disunity within the works of a single artist, as we saw in Chapter Two and especially in Chapter Three, (2) disunity among various artists in Shanghai, and (3) disunity between general tendencies in Shanghai and those in Beijing, the Mecca of contemporary art in China. To locate these disunities will, hopefully, paint a broader and more dynamic picture of Shanghai art during the 1990s, one in which political memories are interwoven with aesthetic detachment, resistance to and compromise with commercialism, and global dialogue, side by side with "cultural war" against Western hegemony.

³ Ibid., p. 165.
The Surge of Political Pop and Cynical Realism

The first art wave in the 1990s was "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism," painting conditioned by social realities after the Tiananmen Square Incident and initiated and supported mainly by Beijing artists. Wang Guangyi 王廣義 (b. 1956) of Beijing and Yu Youhan of Shanghai were two leading figures of the "Political Pop" side of this new wave. Their paintings in this category juxtapose images of Mao Zedong and other stereotypes from Cultural Revolution-period posters with the forms of American Pop Art (see Wang Guangyi's *Great Castigation Series: Coca-cola* [Da pipan xilie: kekou kele 大批判系列: 可口可樂], plate 4.1). Their art's ironic political parody arises partially from their loose execution and garish surfaces, but even more so from the way that Communism encounters capitalism, and the political heroes in the collective Chinese memory engage in a dialogue with Western market icons.

The Cynical Realists, typified by Beijing artists Fang Lijun 方勵鈞 (b. 1963), Liu Wei 劉煒 (b. 1965), Zhao Bandi 趙半狄 (b. 1963), and Yu Hong 余紅 (b. 1966), depicted the banal, unexciting, and nihilistic fragments of everyday life (e. g., Fang Lijun's *Series 2: no. 2* [Dier zhi er 第二組之二], plate 4.2). This became the younger generation's favorite method of satirizing the social and political environment that they encountered. Born in the 1960s, these artists had a passive or blurred memory of the Mao period and were no longer idealistic, especially after witnessing the Tiananmen Square Incident. Their paintings revealed a very personal, inverted, and trivial perspective towards

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4 Ibid., plate 35.
the present reality, which both expressed their political dissatisfaction, while relieving their own sense of helplessness and anxiety.  

As already mentioned, shortly after the exhibition "China's New Art, Post 1989" held in Hongkong in 1993, this new art wave of political parody attracted a great deal of attention from the overseas art world. Although this sort of painting aroused the interest of the Western audience in contemporary Chinese art, it also created the false impression in the "politically and culturally exotic eye of...[its] consumers" (largely Westerners) that in the early 1990s resistance to the regime's ideological control was the only concern of creative artists in China. Meanwhile, the capitalistic marketing methods of the art world created a great commercial success outside China for paintings of political parody. This encouraged many other artists at home to imitate the same subject matter and style, diminishing the initial artistic and ideological contribution of the genre and even lowering it to the level of kitsch, or what Milan Kundera aptly calls

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6 Art critic Li Xianting promoted both Political Pop and Cynical Realist art. He explained the latter as "an attitude of awakening sarcasm, an attitude aiming at challenging any intention to change the reality, and also an attitude of dissoluteness and helplessness in the face of anxiety." 蔣展興的諷刺的態度，一種對任何改變現狀的企圖挑戰的態度，一種身處焦慮狀態卻放棄不顧和無奈無能的態度. Monica Dematte, Qi Yule 齊玉榮 tr., "Li Xianting tan Zhongguo xiandai yishu" 李贛廷談中國現代藝術, Palazzo Ruini quarterly contemporary art magazine in Chinese (Luyinigong wenhua xinxi qikan 露藝宮文化信息期刊), 1 (Spring, 1994), unpaginated.

7 In 1993, the reworked exhibition travelled to Sydney, Berlin, the Venice Biennale, and a year later, to London and Vancouver. The leading European art magazine Flash Art also reported the exhibition of this new Chinese art and described its "mistrust of idealism, spiritual wounding, and the desire for transcendence and escape." See "New Chinese art at Marlborough," Flash art, 27.175 (March/April, 1994), p. 61.

8 Hou Hanru, "Beyond the cynical-China Avant-garde in the 1990s," Art and Asia Pacific, 3.1 (1996), p. 44.

9 For example, in 1992 Wang Guangyi's oil painting Great Criticism (1990), which combines proletarian poster images of the Cultural Revolution with Coca Cola signs, became the cover image of the January/February issue of Flash Art. According to Andrew Solomon's report, one year later Wang's work "reached prices in excess of $20,000. He recently rented a $200 hotel room just 'to feel what it was like to live like an art superstar.'" See Flash art, 25.162 (January/February, 1992), cover page. Andrew Solomon, "Their irony," p. 49.
"the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling."

Shanghai: Ambiguity in Political Parody

In Shanghai, paintings with political symbols from the Maoist period flourished, too. First of all, the "ambivalent and incontrovertible love for Chairman Mao" observed by Andrew Solomon in Chinese avant-garde circles, made the image of this political icon a favored subject matter of several Shanghai painters, including Yu Youhan, Li Shan and Xue Song (b. 1964). Yet their creations were different from what one saw in the works of the Beijing artist Wang Guangyi, who in his 1988 painting Mao Zedong placed several monotonous, iconographic portraits of Chairman Mao behind a prison-bar grid, thus, provoking the critical response from Ellen Johnston Laing, that they were too clear to "further stimulate the intellect."

The appropriation of the Mao image by Shanghai artists was not simply directed at a total negation of the Maoist ideology of the past; rather their Mao paintings, though easily classified under the category of Political Pop art, actually

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11 Andrew Solomon, "Their irony," p. 66.
12 Ellen Johnston Laing, "Is there Post-modern art in the People's Republic of China?" in John Clark ed., *Modernity in Asian art*, Sydney, 1993, p. 221. For Wang Guangyi, "the ultimate significance of art is the extinction of iconography which results in the complete disability of aesthetic judgement." Ibid., 219. In a short essay written by Wang Guangyi himself, he discussed the meaning of the "cultural revisionism" (wenhua xiu zheng zhu yi 文化修正主義) intended by him in his art work. He stated that facing all the pre-existing cultural iconographies (wenhua tushi 文化圖式) was a fact for artists nowadays. "We should examine it critically, and then engage in a certain revision of this cultural fact." 我們可以用批判的眼光審視它，而後對這一文化事實進行某種修正。 He further claimed that this "cultural revisionism" was the very meaning of his existence as an artist. See Wang Guangyi, "Dui sange wenti de huida" 對三個問題的回答, *Meishu*, 243.3 (March, 1988), p.57. In Wang's *Great Castigation Series*, he seems to engage in a revision or a criticism of the cultural iconographies in both the past Maoist ideology and the current commercial system.
concealed more personal messages and ambiguous feelings along with their questioning of Mao's absolute authority. When I asked Li Shan: "What do you think about people calling your work Political Pop art?" he responded that it "reflects historical phenomena which have been interwoven with the culture of the individual." 13

Similarly, Yu Youhan's visions of Mao Zedong, as seen in Chapter Two, are more an ironic comment on the loss of idealism in the present Chinese society than a total negation of the Maoist era. Being an enthusiastic believer, participant in, and victim of Mao's political movements, Yu finds the memory of that age of extreme importance to both his life and art. He admitted during an interview with Andrew Solomon in 1993: "When we reject Chairman Mao, we reject a piece of ourselves." 14 Certainly, it is a piece of himself which contains rich personal meanings. In his notes on art, Yu claimed:

In my work, the image of Mao Zedong has diverse connotations: sometimes he represents China, sometimes the East, sometimes the culture, sometimes the leader, sometimes the progressive and sometimes the conservative, or sometimes he is merely a decorative pattern. 15

In my 1998 interview with Yu, he also pointed out that Wang Guangyi's paintings stress negative criticism to an excess and that he himself wishes to create a more optimistic vision of the Mao period. Thus, the ironic sense is present in Yu's paintings, but the radiant image of Chairman Mao still remains. As Li Xianting said: "A misguided idealism is better than no idealism at all." 16

13 My interview with Li Shan in his studio on June 22, 1998.
14 Andrew Solomon, "Their irony," p. 66.
16 Ibid.
Li Shan, who belongs to the same generation as Yu Youhan, is famous for his *Rouge Series* (*Yanzhi xieliè* 腮脂係列), which he started in 1989. These works are characterized by sensuous, pink flower petals, which sometimes surround androgynous faces, and at other times are entangled with male nudes and their sex organs. In 1990, the Mao image appeared in Li's *Rouge Series: No.8* (*Yanzhi xieliè zhi ba* 腮脂係列之八) (plate 4.4), but it was very different from Wang Guangyi's or Yu Yonghan's rendition of this political icon. Under Li's brush, an originally patriarchal Mao was feminized by a pinkish background and the reduction through the use of light and shade of the Chairman's face to a triangular shape consistent with traditional Chinese standards of female beauty. Even more extreme was the way in which Mao was depicted with a pink lotus in his mouth, rather like a Spanish Flamenco dancer. Another rendition of Mao Zedong was more restrained in its use of the color rouge, but the image of Mao was equally feminine, or at least sexually ambiguous (plate 4.5). One may impose a political reading on Li Shan's Mao paintings, interpreting them as a feminine subversion of the monotonously patriarchal Mao era, but this phenomena may be explained even better by the artist's own ambiguous sexuality.

Xue Song is another Shanghai-based artist who appropriated the image of Chairman Mao in his paintings from time to time. In 1990, an accidental fire

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17 To know more about Li Shan's *Rouge Series*, see Wu Liang, "Tongwang yanzhi diguo di daolu" 通往胭脂帝國的道路, *Yishu chaoliu*, 2.2 (February, 1993), pp. 62-8.
19 The ambiguity is also manifested in Li Shan's own explanation of his *Rouge Series*. In his obscure article, Li admitted that "my motive and reason to create *Rouge Series* has to do with the game between this wai wei xing yang shi 外圍性樣式 and authority." The Chinese expression left untranslated in this sentence can be understood in two ways, "peripheral style" and "peripheral sexual style." A close examination of Li's article reveals that he is emphasizing the second meaning. As he wrote: "Sexuality and authority construct an overwhelming vision of absurdity." 性與權力雙方構成一個波濤壯麗的悖論景觀. Li Shan 李山, "<Yanzhi> xilie yu wo" <胭脂>係列與我, *Yishu chaoliu*, 2.2 (February, 1993), p. 69.
destroyed Xue's studio and burned all his books to ashes, and since then ashes and charred fragments of burnt books have been used as major components on his canvases. Xue has constructed silhouettes of various historical images from them, ranging from political icons and journalistic pictures to ones deriving from books on art history. In *Receiving* (*Jiejian* 接見) (plate 4.6) made in 1991, Xue burned the collected writings of Chairman Mao into small pieces which he then pasted around the edges of his canvas. In the center of this work he painted a blurred image of Chairman Mao in a familiar gesture of receiving the people. In a similar painting, *Helmsman* (*Duoshou* 舵手) produced in 1996, the image of Mao was even more easily identified (plate 4.7). Using Chairman Mao as subject matter is quite rare among artists born in the 1960s, and in the case of Xue Song, whose mother, a middle school teacher, was tortured to death during the Cultural Revolution period, its use seems quite complex. Political parody is certainly one possible explanation, but if Xue intends to destroy past dogma by burning Mao's writings, then why does he bother to reconstruct the Chairman's deified image again and again? Does he intend to represent an era full of political enthusiasm and show the lack of a spiritual leader at the present time? Or, graduating from the Shanghai Theater Academy (*Shanghai xiju xueyuan* 上海戲劇學院), where Li Shan teaches, does Xue follow the path of that senior artist to get quick recognition and success? No matter what the answer is, Xue Song's anger, criticism, and opportunism seem to have been restrained and neutralized by the aesthetic interplay between material, texture, form, and color in his works.

As we saw in Chapter Three, Zhou Tiehai and Yan Xu also appropriated the format of Cultural Revolution posters in their graffiti produced in 1991. However, their work was even farther from the approach of the Beijing artists,
since their parody was not directed at the regime's policies or the status quo, but mainly at the special situation in the domestic art world.

Non-political Gesture

In Shanghai art of the early 1990s, appropriating political images from the Maoist era was not a rare phenomenon, but works of this sort were not received favorably in local art circles. In November of 1993, Wu Liang, the chief editor of a literary journal *Shanghai Literature* (*Shanghai wenxue* 上海文学), published an article in *Jiangsu Art Monthly*, attacking Political Pop painting in general as a "sociological tool" 社会学的工具, which subjected the autonomous aesthetics of art to an external relationship with politics and ideology. Wu further criticized Political Pop art as an inefficient "sociological tool," since its criticism of the social reality in China was elusive and indirect, and aimed at Western acceptance rather than creating a revolutionary effect among the domestic masses. Wu's article stood as the first critical voice against political or political-looking art in the Chinese art circles of the nineties. To a large extent, Wu's ideas reflected a prevalent local attitude to art making, which was further supported by the growing non-political stance of Shanghai artists.

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20 Wu Liang, "You meiyou yige 'zhengzhi bopu'" 有沒有一個政治波普, *Jiangsu huakan*, 155.11 (November, 1993), pp. 33-4. In his other article published about one year later, Wu again criticized the work of the Political Pop or Cynical Realistic style in three ways: (1) its lack of self-sufficiency, (2) its monotonous and deficient imagery, which was a result of opportunistic imitation and self-reproduction, and (3) its incapability to connect with the Chinese audience and society. In his essay, Wu implied his preference for art with sufficient aesthetic qualities, formalist sensitivity, and craftsmanship. He also pointed out that "the image...is not the exposition of cognition, or the representation of a fact, but is cognition and also a fact directly by itself" 畫像...不是一種認識的演繹或一個事實的陳述，它直接是一種認識，並且直接是一個事實。His view represented the countercurrent against the excessive use of art for political and social purposes in China ever since the beginning of this century. Wu Liang, "Tuxiang de kuifa," pp. 3-4.
during the early nineties. These artists hoped to rectify the misunderstandings and the tide of kitsch thrown up by the earlier trend to political parody and to restore art's long-lost autonomy.

Ding Yi offers us a very convincing example of this phenomenon in the realm of painting. His decade-long *Cross Series* paintings, based entirely on the simple, objective structure of the figure +, intend to negate any possible political and cultural references and create a pure visual experience for the viewer. In addition to Ding Yi, two other well-known Shanghai painters, Shen Fan 申凡 (b. 1952), and Qin Yifeng focused solely on color, texture, and compositional arrangement in their canvases.

At the end of the 1980s, Shen Fan developed a unique technique for making his abstract paintings. He covered canvas or wooden boards with oil paint, then placed rice paper on top of them, rubbing it so that the oil would transfer onto the paper. This laborious process was repeated for each sheet of paper several times, creating a rich and abstract surfact. The works he created in the 1990s reveal his fascination with the primary colors, especially red, white, and black. As a result of covering his surfaces again and again, Shen leaves layers of overlapping and interwoven vestiges on the surface of rice paper, thus, allowing his materials to display their own aesthetic existence, contingent but self-sufficient (plate 4.8). Qin Yifeng, who actively participated in the modern art events of Shanghai together with Ding Yi during the 1980s, has devoted himself to his *Line Field Series* (Xianzhen xilie 線陣係列) during this decade. These acrylic paintings on canvas are composed entirely of a rich interweaving of straight and curved lines (plate 4.9).

Although the abstract patterns that the three artists are obsessed with vary from one to another, their attitude and approach towards art making are

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21 The colorplate is from *Shen Fan 申凡*, Shanghai, 1997, unpaginated.
strikingly similar. For them, art is neither the mirror of the surrounding world's shifting scenery nor the symbolic record of the irony, nostalgia, or melancholy inspired by the individual's social and political life. Rather it is a meditative process of labor, reiteration, and propagation, a process in which the exclusive contemplation of problems intrinsic to painting itself fits into Clement Greenberg's definition of "purity" and "modernism" in art.\footnote{Clement Greenberg, "Modernist painting," in F. Frascina and C. Harrison, Modern art and modernism: A critical anthology, New York, 1982, pp. 5-10. Reprinted from Art and literature, 4 (Spring, 1965), pp. 193-201.} These three Shanghai artists seem to be the earliest consistently non-representational painters in China.\footnote{This can be supported by Ellen Laing's argument that there had been no truly non-representational art in China up till the late eighties. See Ellen Laing, pp. 209-212.}

In the early nineties, another important figure in Shanghai art circles, Song Haidong, also shifted to a non-political approach in his art practice. Song's early conceptual work Not Misprints (Bingfei yinshua cuowu 並非印刷錯誤) (1990, plate 4.10) and installations, such as Lie Detector (1991), in which he presented a flight recorder as a lie detector, carried strong messages deriving from external reality and mainly questioned the nature of truth and communication in social structures and forms. However, after the Shanghai Garage Show of 1991, Song began a process of introspective self-cultivation. He created hundreds of paper works that recorded nothing else but random, subtle traces of water, ink, chalk powder, and even dust, all left behind by his brush's and fingers' contact with the surface of the cardboard (plate 4.11). In his notes, Song wrote:
I believe that between this material and the other there is something that exists... This kind of 'existence' does not lie behind the art work, nor is conceived by the mind, but emerges gradually from within the work itself.\textsuperscript{24}

His interest in bringing forth this kind of inner existence excluded "subject matter, riddle answers, cultural interference, personal metaphor, and historical clues" from his Minimalist works.\textsuperscript{25} In other words, he was able to emancipate his art from the tangle of social life, ideology, and politics.

Within the category of installation, works by Shi Yong, Qian Weikang, and some other artists of the Huashan Art Vocational School represented the "linguistic and psychological shift towards a certain scientific rationale" as required by "metropolitanization."\textsuperscript{26} Inspired by modern physics and technical innovations, both Shi and Qian employed scientific measurement in their installations from 1993 to 1995 (see pp. 73-81). With its strong emphasis on accuracy, rationalism, and refinement, their work displayed an abstract relationship between time and space, form and material, thus, offering another form of resistance to social and political interference in the arts. In May 1995 when Shi Yong and Qian Weikang were holding their installation show "Not Here, Not There" in a Vancouver artist run center, another version of "Mao Goes Pop" was exhibited in the Vancouver Art Gallery under the title of "Here, Not There." This coincidence ended up being a frontal engagement between the art of non-political gesture and the art of political parody, both of which have co-existed in the Chinese art scene since the early 1990s.

\textsuperscript{24} Song Haidong's unpublished note written in July 1994, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{25} Wu Liang, "Zuoweizhong cuizaiwu di 'henji'—Song Haidong de zhishang zuopin" 作爲一種存在的'痕跡'--宋海多的職上作品, Song Haidong 宋海多 (exhibition catalogue), Shanghai, 1993, preface.
Based on the previous discussion, we can differentiate two distinctive art practices in the Shanghai art circles of the early 1990s. One was to appropriate familiar political images into art works that, besides their concealed ambiguous meanings, inevitably took on an appearance of political parody, and, to a certain extent, reflected general concerns and sentiments prevalent in society. The other was to exclude political symbols and connotations from art production, making art an autonomous space where materials, forms, and pigments could display their own power and wisdom. This phenomenon seems to resemble the situation in Shanghai art circles during the 1920s and 1930s, since we see once again the contrast between art reflecting social-political reality and art created mainly for its own sake.

However, beneath the similarities lies a fundamental difference. During the Great Shanghai Age, some artists supported the idea of art for art's sake in their individual practices and group manifestos, but the motives behind their ideas were actually quite similar to those who used art to serve politics, for the sense of social responsibility and the desire to carry out a modernization of China through the practice of new art forms stood as the major impetus behind their modernist practice. It was not until the late 1980s, or perhaps the early 1990s, when some Shanghai artists persistently detached their works from social and political involvement, at least on the subjective level, and that the first thorough practice of art for art's sake came into being in modern Shanghai.

One might maintain that this non-political approach should still be seen as political. Shanghai art critics Zhu Qi even defined it as "an antagonistic, ideological strategy," arguing that art of this kind, even though apparently differing from politically-oriented art (i.e. Political Pop art) was actually a trend parallel to the latter, since it was equally inspired by a nationalistic motivation, which aimed at constructing modernism in China by developing a
dialogue with the West. Nevertheless, the exclusive interest of these Shanghai artists in formal aesthetics, abstract concepts, and the process of art making demonstrates their desire to restore autonomy to art, rather than making it an appendage to something else.

Certainly the reasons why art for art's sake emerged during the early nineties in Shanghai require further study. During this decade, with the sense of social responsibility and idealism declining in Chinese art circles, art became more and more the individual's business; and personal relations among artists became increasingly distant. Unlike their ancestors during the 1920s and 1930s, contemporary Shanghai artists hardly ever work in groups, societies, or associations. Although most of them teach in art schools, the fact that they have to give instruction in academic painting and sculpture, assigned subjects irrelevant to their artistic interests, makes it nearly impossible for them to build a give-and-take relationship with their students, most of whom are only interested in becoming commercial artists anyway. Moreover, artists no longer play the roles of art critics, writers, and theoreticians, as Ni Yide and Xu Beihong did half a century ago, and their artistic ideas are only expressed through their works and communicated within a limited circle.

Not only has their relationship with society become distant, but they now lack a public voice. According to Ralph Croizier's research, during the 1920s and 1930s in Shanghai "several of the leading newspaper carried weekly art supplements and broad interest pictorial magazines regularly covered modern art events...That means that the urban reading public at least knew of the existence of modern art." In the nineties, the general Shanghai public pays no attention to modern art practice. Especially during the early nineties, a

27 Zhu Qi, "Qiekai pingguo hou...--neibu geming de kuwei haishi zaisheng?" 切開國家後...--內部革命的枯萎還是再生?, Meishu guancha 美術觀察, 4.3 (March, 1996), pp. 44-5.
period when there was no encouragement from foreign collectors in Shanghai and when the environment was either hostile or indifferent, the Shanghai artist withdrew further from the public space as a cultural "elite" becoming a "small man" in his studio and, thus, making the practice of art for art's sake a possible and distinctive phenomenon. Although their art making may seem selfish and even anti-social, this sort of inward-looking, individualized practice enabled them to explore the nature of art in greater depth.
Commercialism and Games Played With Commercialism After 1992

The Lure and the Perils of the Art Market

Deng Xiaoping's southern tour of 1992 accelerated the development of a free-market economy in China. As Michael Sullivan pointed out, contemporary Chinese art "from this time forward...was to be bound ever closer to the art market in a way familiar in the West and Japan but unprecedented in China itself."29

Outside the country, international recognition, especially with regard to painting, was always closely connected to financial profit. After the exhibition "China New Art: Post-1989," paintings of the "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism" styles attracted worldwide attention and achieved a considerable commercial success.30 In November of 1993, the Art Asia Fair was also held in Hong Kong for the sake of selling and buying contemporary Chinese art works. According to some sources, the famous veteran artist, Wu Guanzhong 吳冠中's (b. 1919) distinctive landscapes were priced from 300,000 to 600,000 Hong Kong dollars, while the realistic academic oil paintings of renowned mainland painters such as Wang Yidong 王沂東 (b. 1955) and Jiang Guofang 姜國芳 (b. 1951) fetched prices ranging from 300,000 to 500,000 Hong Kong dollars. Even

30 According to Iain Robertson's report, Johnson Chang, the proprietor of the Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong, who organized the China New Art: Post-1989 exhibition, "was flushed with success" at the 1995 Venice Biennale, "at which he introduced the work of two of his Mainland protégés, Liu Wei 劉偉 and Zhang Xiaogang 張曉剛," (both of whom painted in the Political Pop or Cynical Realistic style). By September of 1995, Chang's mainland artists had "on average seen the value of their work rise ten-fold." Iain Robertson, "'Shanghai not yet an art market,' says Johnson Chang," The art newspaper, 51 (September, 1995), p. 37.
the Shanghai artist, Wang Ziwei's (b. 1964) "Political Pop" portrait of Mao Zedong (plate 4.12) became a "name-brand" commodity.\(^{31}\)

Inside China, the Guangzhou First Oil Painting Biennial (Guangzhou diyijie youhua shuangnianzhan 廣州第一界油畫雙年展) was privately organized and sponsored in October of 1992 to sell contemporary Chinese art to newly rich domestic entrepreneurs.\(^{32}\) According to Lü Peng 呂澎 (b. 1956), one of its major organizers, the original purpose of this exhibition was "to borrow marketing methods to further develop modern art trends emerging since the early 1980s."\(^{33}\) Despite the great controversy that the biennial caused in contemporary art circles, it became the first crucial impetus for the development of commerce in contemporary art inside China, a phenomenon that was strongly supported by some scholars in their writings.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{31}\) Valerie C. Doran, "The commerce of art," *Art and Asia Pacific*, 1.3 (1994), pp. 24-7. The source of Wang Ziwei's painting is Ibid., p. 24. One journalist of *Wenhui Daily* 文匯報, Bo Xiaobo, who was a close friend of Wang Ziwei in the eighties, informed me that Wang started to incorporate the image of Mao Zedong into his painting even earlier than Yu Youhan. Wang has been based in Toronto since 1995. My interview with Bo Xiaobo on June 8, 1997.

\(^{32}\) This large exhibition was sponsored by a private company in Sichuan, the Xishu Art Co. 西蜀藝術公司, to the amount of 2.5 million yuan. More than two hundred artists participated in the exhibition, which showed over five hundred paintings. Before the twenty-seven prize-winning paintings, most of which turned out to be avant-garde works, were selected, another domestic non-state company, the Shenzhen Dong Hui Industrial Company 深圳東輝實業股份有限公司, had spent one million yuan to purchase all the works that would win awards. See Chen Xiaoxin 陳孝信, "1990-1992 nian Zhongguo (dalu) meishu dashi jishu liie" 1990-1992 年中國 (大陸) 美術大事記記述略, in Zhang Qing ed., *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo meishu 1990-1992 九十年代中國美術 1990-1992*, Wulumuqi, 1996, pp. 178, 193. See also Michael Sullivan, p. 278, and Pang Ren 旁人, "Zhanping xinxi" 展評信息, in Zhao Bing ed., p. 40.


\(^{34}\) Gao Minglu admitted that this exhibition was "the first nationwide avant-garde exhibition since the Tiananmen Incident," but he also criticized the naivety of its purpose and its corrosive effect on the avant-garde spirit of contemporary art in China. Gao Minglu ed., *Inside out*, p. 201 and by the same author, "Zhongguo yishu de zhanchang zai Zhongguo bentu" 中國藝術的戰場在中國本土, *Jiangsu huakan*, 150.6 (June, 1993), p. 16. Another important critic Li Xianting stated that the organizers of this exhibition made so many compromises with their sponsors that the show mixed avant-garde works with a large body of
One year later, almost at the same time that the 1993 Art Asia Fair was being held in Hong Kong, the Chinese Art Bureau of the Ministry of Culture sponsored the China Art Exposition in Guangzhou. This was "an unprecedented event in that it was the first time an officially organized exhibition in China was allowed to sell art." The Cynical Realistic paintings by avant-garde artists such as Zhang Xiaogang 張曉剛 (b. 1958) from Sichuan, whose works were featured in the 1993 Venice Biennale, and Zhu Wei from Beijing all sold at very healthy prices. In 1995, after it had been staged in Guangzhou twice, the China Art Exposition, the largest national showcase for contemporary Chinese art since 1993, was even moved up to Beijing, the city with the tightest ideological control in China. Although the 1995 exposition continued to "provide an interesting cross-section of Chinese works of art and occasional glimpses of newly emerging trends," its eclectic and commercial nature, suggested by the dominance of traditional bird-and-flower paintings and academic realistic oil works in the style of Chen Yifei 陳逸飛 (b. 1946), made it mainly an exposition concerned with the commerce of art.

With China more and more open to foreign investment, foreign dealers and collectors have also moved in since the early 1990s, some buying academic commercial paintings. This caused the disapproval of many participating artists. See Monica Dematte, Qi Yule tr., unpaginated; and Pang Ren, p. 40; and Lu Peng, p. 17. At the same time, others were vocally supporting the commercialization of art. One month after the exhibition, Li Xiangmin 李向民, an editor of the scholarly journal Jianghai Xuekan 江海學刊, published an article about the subject in Jiangsu Huakan, the leading monthly journal of contemporary art in China. Based on a historical study and comparison, Li boldly promoted the idea that entering the market is the most beneficial way and the ultimate destination of art. Li Xiangmin, "Shichanghua: Yishu de zhongji guisu" 市場化: 藝術的終極歸宿, Jiangsu huakan, 143.11 (November, 1992), pp. 11, 19-21.


36 However, at that time any artist who created works which were not offensive to the Chinese government could show them in the China National Art Gallery in Beijing if he was willing to pay the rental fee. See Lynn Macritchie, p. 51.

oil paintings to make a quick profit and others working with the avowed purpose of promoting contemporary Chinese art in the long run. Quite a few foreign-run art galleries, such as the Red Gate Gallery (opened in 1991), the Court Yard Gallery, and the Hanmo Art Center, were established in Beijing and were able to attract many avant-garde artists to their stables.\textsuperscript{38}

The huge influx of foreign and Chinese investment into Shanghai since 1992 has made the city resume its status as a domestic and international economic center quickly. Surprisingly, however, Shanghai, "with no dealers and little cultural infrastructure," did not see the formation of a market for contemporary art in the first part of the nineties.\textsuperscript{39} There was no privately or officially organized art fair. The local government showed great enthusiasm for developing a market for brush and ink painting as well as Chinese antiques as early as 1992, but it had no interest in supporting any contemporary art practice that diverged from the academic tradition.\textsuperscript{40} The fact that Beijing had been the art Mecca of China for two decades attracted most of the foreign dealers there, and the first foreign-run gallery in Shanghai since 1949, the Shanghai-Art Gallery, a venue which is devoted to the promotion of contemporary Chinese art, was only opened in 1995.

However, the lack of a local market at that time did not mean that Shanghai artists steered clear from the business of art. During the first half of the 1990s, selling works to private collectors after overseas exhibitions or through agents in other parts of China was already a common practice among local painters, including non-academic ones. For example, Yu Youhan's

\textsuperscript{38} Joan Lebold Cohen, "China's flowering galleries--a group of serious new galleries is challenging the status quo in the Chinese art world," \textit{Art news}, 96.9 (October, 1997), pp. 146-7.

\textsuperscript{39} Iain Robertson, "Shanghai not yet an art market," p. 37.

\textsuperscript{40} Tuyet Nguyet and John Cairns, "’92 Beijing international auction and China treasures ’92 Shanghai," \textit{Arts of Asia}, (January/February, 1993), pp. 55-61.
portraits of Chairman Mao, which had appeared frequently on the covers of important exhibition catalogues featuring contemporary Chinese art since 1993, became very popular commodities among Hong Kong and foreign collectors. Ding Yi's Cross paintings, which were mainly created for the sake of art itself and for the artist's personal, interior quest, have also came onto the market as a result of his increasing international exposure since 1993. In 1994 the New Amsterdam Art Information Consultancy in Beijing, run by a dealer from the Netherlands, became Ding's domestic agent, and his work on canvas reached prices from 2,500 to 3,000 U. S. dollars by the end of 1994. By this time he had also signed contracts with a number of foreign galleries and dealers who were displaying his work overseas.

The art market did benefit quite a few Shanghai painters, enabling them to work under better conditions and to concentrate on artistic creation without being distracted by economic needs. However, entering the art market was not always pleasant for them, and artists sometimes risked losing their reputations and even their artistic creativity. For instance, despite their serious motivation, Yu Youhan's Mao paintings, along with other "Political Pop" art, were attacked as "double kitsch" (both "political kitsch" and "commercial kitsch") by the critic Gao Minglu, and Ding Yi's Cross Series was indirectly criticized as a collection of homogeneous decorations designed for the moneyed class. Judged by the kind

41 Ding Yi's letters to me on October 8, 1994 and November 20, 1994.
42 See Gao Minglu's discussion of "Political Pop" art in his "From elite to small man," pp. 52-3. In one article, the Suzhou-based art critic Zhang Qing wrote: "They (abstract painters) often integrate the highly finished quality of their painting into the environment of five-star hotels, deluxe apartments, and business offices." 他們往往將畫面的完成度與五星級賓館, 高級公寓, 商務辦公樓中的環境渾為一體。 Since Zhang lives very close to Shanghai, and his study mainly focuses on the contemporary art practice in and around the Shanghai area, his critical comment on the abstract paintings as such very likely alludes to Ding Yi and Shen Fan's work sold by the Shanghai Art Galley. Zhang Qing, "Ni gudu--jinri Zhongguo yishujia de zhuangtai" 你孤獨--今日中國藝術家的狀態, Jiangsu huakan, 196.4 (April, 1997), p. 40.
of works they created, some Shanghai artists seemed to have become aware of the dangers that commercialism posed for their art. If in the eighties the Chinese avant-garde artists mainly fought against the Communist repression and Marxist ideology for individual freedom; then in this decade they encountered a more powerful rival which possesses the ability to subject the free spirit of the artist to the basest material values. Therefore, non-conformity to commercialism became another visible characteristic in some local artists' practice in the first half of the 1990s.

Uncollectability

For those who had no intention of becoming involved in the art market, uncollectability was highlighted as the most important feature of their works. This was first reflected in these artists' choice of media. According to a report published in Jiangsu Art Monthly, one of the top ten news items in the Chinese art world during 1993 was that "experiments in installations and performance art obviously increased." As the art critic Yi Ying 易英 wrote in his article:

When a conceptual artist chooses the medium of action, performance, or installation, it means that his choice will be excluded by the academy and the market...and that he locates himself in a position opposed to public taste and social norms.

In Shanghai, this phenomenon was particularly obvious. From 1993 to 1995, a new installation school, which I have called the Huashan Installation School, appeared in the city (see pp. 80-1). Artists belonging to this school, best

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exemplified by Shi Yong and Qian Weikang, devoted themselves to developing a very distinctive trend of installation art. At the same time, female artists such as Chen Yanyin 陳妍音 (b. 1958) and Zhang Xin 張新 also worked with the same media as their male-counterparts, but their use of this long male-dominated art vocabulary was imbued with feminine consciousness and sensitivity. By using their own savings to experiment with new media, and by creating something which was largely uncollectible by nature, these artists demonstrated their detachment from the commerce of art.

In addition to installation, Shanghai artists also did performance art sporadically as a way to create non-collectible work. It is worth mentioning that this medium was especially popular in Beijing art circles, and artists there employed it as "the most direct way to express the real situation of human beings living in a culturally, politically and morally alienating society." In

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46 In the first part of the nineties, Beijing artists frequently gave physically violent and psychologically disturbing performances, which were largely political in meaning. For instance, Zhu Fadong 朱發東 walked down the streets of Beijing with a sign on his back, reading: "This Person for Sale. Price negotiable" 此人出售, 價格面議 (ciren chushou, jiage mianyi). On May 13, 1994, Zhang Huan 張洹 (b. 1965) sat in a typical Chinese public toilet for hours, with fish oil, honey and thousands of flies covering his naked body. In another performance done on June 11, 1994, Zhang even hanged his naked body on a ceiling beam for fifty minutes, during which time he caused himself to bleed slowly, his blood then being burnt on a stove. In these performances, the artist's body was used as an "object of physical and pyschological mutilation" in a way that intended to "awaken public consciousness of human dignity" within a specific social and political context. Hou Hanru, "Beyond the cynical," pp. 44-5. Also see Leng Ling 冷琳, "Shi wo (Is me)—jiushi niandai zhongguo xiandai yishu qushi" 是我 (Is me)—九十年代中國現代藝術趨勢, Jiangsu huakan, 172.4 (April, 95), p. 18; and Zeng Xiaojun 曾小俊, Ai Weiwei 艾未未 and Xubing 徐冰 ed, Hongqi 紅旗 (the first issue of this underground art publication), Beijing, 1994, pp. 56-7, 70-1.
Shanghai, performance art was not characterized by violence and the use of allegory intended to criticize the regime's political and cultural policies, as it was in Beijing; rather it explored a new vocabulary for the sake of communicating rich individual concepts rooted in a broader intellectual context. For example, Shi Yong's *City Space: Moving--Leaping Twelve Hours*, already discussed in the last chapter, not only created an interactive relation between the artist and the audience, but also transplanted art into an open city space, thus, illuminating the universal issue of an individual's position in an information-oriented urban network.

The Shanghai artist Ni Weihua 倪衛華 (b. 1962) is another important figure who has worked in the field of conceptual art during this decade. In 1992 and 1993, he created a series of performances called *Continuously Spreading Event* (Lianxu kuosan shitai 連續擴散事態), with the aim of creating a break in the chain of information, knowledge, and communication in people's daily life. In 1992, he had used computer technology to create non-existent Chinese characters, which he printed on the surfaces of hundreds of little red cubes made from paper. In his performance, Ni distributed these red cubes, covered entirely with his newly-invented Chinese characters, selling them in shops, sending them via the mail, and giving them away to people on the street (plate 4.13). In 1993, he once again used a computer to process several popular street posters (one of which was an advertisement for the treatment of venereal diseases seen everywhere in China) into a form that could not be read. His performance was to paste these one by one onto walls next to the original posters on which they had been modeled (plate 4.14).

Shi's and Ni's performances conveyed their artistic concepts in the form of seemingly familiar, low-profile social activities, such as crossing the city space or proliferating daily information in public. Both artists claimed that, by
creating one-time, make-shift works, which focused on developing intellectual dialogue within the vocabulary of art, rather than creating eye-catching effects through politically-charged, radical behavior, their art was valuable on the conceptual level of communication, but not in the media-stimulated art market.

Certainly it has never been easy for Shanghai artists (or for those in other parts of China) to make installations or performances, when one considers the lack of public support in terms of funding, available venues, or even understanding. Until now, such artists have to earn money from other sources to support their artistic experiments in new media and technologies. In the first half of the nineties, when one could get rich and famous by painting realistic landscapes, females nudes, Chairman Mao, or abstract patterns, the situation for multimedia artists was extremely difficult. The official art venues in Shanghai (except for a few alternative public spaces) shut their doors to installation and performance art, and there was hardly any chance for them to show their works outside China.\footnote{Only three public venues put on brief installation shows in Shanghai during the first half of the nineties. They were the garage in the Shanghai Education Institute, the exhibition hall of the Shanghai Huashan Art Vocational School, and the vacated building which used to be the Shanghai Children's Library. From January 22nd to 24th, an installation show, entitled Installation—the Positionality of Vocabulary 裝置--語言的方位 was held in the third venue. Seven Shanghai artists participated in the show, including Wang Nanming 王南溟, the curator.} Under such trying circumstances, these artists luckily adopted new showing methods to protect the vitality of their art and its communication from political censorship and commercial temptations. These methods included: (1) Showing art in private living spaces, an example of which is Shi Yong's \textit{Amplification Site: a Cross Echo In a Private Living Space}, (see page 82-3) typifying what Gao Minglu calls Apartment Art, or art in which
the artist locates "a distinctive personal discourse" in his "unsalable and unexhibitable" work.48

(2) Showing art in a documentary form, a new method first used as early as 1991 in Chinese art circles to further intellectual communication in a time when the large-scale exhibition of experimental art was impossible to realize inside the country.49 Shanghai artists showed great support for this new showing method. Besides actively taking part in the three national document exhibitions from 1991 to 1994, they also participated in smaller group activities carried out individually in separate places and later recorded in documentary form, as we have already seen in Chapter Three.50 According to Karen Smith's report on these group activities, by producing works "that can neither be bought nor possessed," and by circulating the documents of their works in the art world, these artists broke their silence in a modern Chinese society that "joyfully succumbs to consumerism."51

(3) Showing artistic ideas in the form of proposals. In July 1994, four Shanghai artists, Shi Yong, Qian Weikang, Ni Weihua and Hu Jianping exhibited

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49 In 1994 the first national-scale document exhibition was held in Beijing at the suggestion of the Sichuan art critic Wang Lin. It showed photographs of recent works by over forty artists and later travelled to some other parts of China. One year later, the second national document exhibition was opened in Guangzhou. In 1994, the third document exhibition was held in Shanghai under the title "Installation--Environment--Performance (Zhuangzhi--huanjing--xingwei装 置--環境--行為." It presented photographs and slides of installations and performances created by Chinese artists at home and overseas during the 1990s. See Chen Xiaoxing, p. 172. Ji Fen 紀芬, "Zhongguo dangdai yishu wenxian (资料) zhan--xijiao zhan (现代文献--展览)," in Zeng Xiaojun et al ed., Hongqi, pp. 150-1. Lin Hanjian 林漢建, "Jilu <zhongguo dangdai yishu wenxian ziliao zhan--disanhui zhan (Shanghai)> 记录<中国当代艺术文献资料展--第三届展 (上海)>," Xingdao ribao 星岛日報, (May 23, 1994), p. 5.
50 There were two group activities, "Agreed on November 26th As a Reason" and "45 Degrees As a Reason," carried out in November 1994 and March 1995, respectively, by artists from Hangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. See Chapter 2, pp. 81, 82. Shanghai artists Shi Yong and Qian Weikang participated in both activities, and Chen Yanyin in the latter.
the blueprints and written explanations for their new artistic ideas in the First Hanmo Exhibition for New Propositions in Art (Shoujie Hanmo yishu xin fang'an dazhan 首界漢墨藝術新方案大展).  

Shi Yong, Qian Weikang, Song Haidong, and Hu Jianping also made contributions to the catalogue Chinese Contemporary Artists' Agenda (1994) (Zhongguo dangdai yishujia gongzuojihua 1994 中國當代藝術家工作計劃 1994), a special collection of proposals for conceptual art.  

By conveying their concepts in a non-objective, dematerialized form, these Shanghai artists, as with their comrades working in the other parts of China, not only challenged the conventional means of artistic expression, but also allowed themselves to maintain the freedom and purity of their art practices in the face of material limitations and commercial interference.  

In the first half of the nineties, fragile, coarse, transient, or non-art materials were also commonly used by Shanghai artists, very likely as a way to endow their work with an impermanent, changing and, thus, unconsumable beauty. For instance, Song Haidong brushed water, color, and even dust onto the surface of cheap cardboard (see p. 134). Shi Yong filled shadows with sliced photo-sensitive paper, thus, subjecting his art to such eroding forces of nature as light, time, and temperature conditions (see p. 76). Qian Weikang covered

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52 Forty-two conceptual artists from all over China participated in this exhibition, which was organized in Beijing. See "Shoujie Hanmo Yishu Xinfangan Dazhan" 首屆漢墨藝術新方案大展, Hanmo yixun 漢墨藝訊, 4.2 (1994), p. 7.  
54 The phenomenon of communicating artistic concepts in the form of proposals, texts, and other printed material in contemporary Chinese art circles during the first part of the nineties is discussed in more detail in Huang Du 黃笛, "Zuowei yizhong duihua de wenben—zhengtuo ganga jingdi de qianwei yishujia" 作爲一種對話的文本—掙脫閹割境地的前衛藝術家, Hualang, 50.3 (March, 1995), pp. 29-32.
sheet iron with a layer of accurately weighed chalk powder, implying that even a light touch could change the original states of his work (see p. 77). Since 1994 Zhou Tiehai has created a group of wall-size graffiti paintings on discarded newspaper and wrapping paper, ironically questioning the commercialization of both life and art (see pp. 103, 106). Even for those whose art had already entered the market, their use of certain materials demonstrated these artists' non-conforming, even critical attitude to the market system. One convincing example was Ding Yi who executed his Cross Series on raw canvas or cheap paper. The unconventional painting materials that he applied to his canvases, such as chalk, charcoal, and sometimes even hair-mousse or roach powder, no doubt challenged the durability of his work as a valuable commercial object (see p. 57).

Thus, we can say that concern for staying away from the corrosive forces of the art market was a major factor influencing these Shanghai artists' practice during the first half of the nineties. However, the shadows in Shi Yong's installations of this period only provided an idealized and highly vulnerable protection for the photosensitive paper inside them, and in no way could they stop the process of change when the work was exposed to light. This can serve as a metaphor for the question of whether Shanghai artists could remain immune to the temptations of the material world in an age when Chinese society was undergoing rapid economic reform and when the meaning of art became more blurred than ever. The answer to this was, no, for in response to the shifting reality, Shanghai artists were, and still are, constantly on the move.

"Moisterning the Brush"
In 1995, the Shang-Art Gallery, run by a Swiss dealer, Lorenz Helbling, opened in Shanghai. From that year until March 1999, it occupied a hallway in a luxurious five-star hotel in the downtown area of Shanghai and showed a miscellany of contemporary Chinese art works. Business has not been bad, and that is probably one reason why Ding Yi eventually let the Shang-Art Gallery represent him. According to Mr. Helbling: "The gallery's buyers are mainly Europeans, Americans, and Southeast Asians who live in China, and a few foreign collectors who visit China sporadically." Besides individual collectors, some overseas galleries and large foreign companies have also bought contemporary Chinese art work regularly, thus, contributing to the development of a growing market in Shanghai. Shortly after its opening, Shang-Art Gallery put a website on the Internet, promoting its artists to a wider public. Now, as a venue of international standing, it stables eighteen artists mainly consisting of established or emerging figures from contemporary Shanghai art circles. Painters, such as Yu Youhan, Li Shan, Ding Yi, Shen Fan, Xue Song, and conceptual artists, such as Zhou Tiehai, Shi Yong, and Chen Yanyin are now all promoted by this gallery.

I do not intend to say that the Shang-Art Gallery played a negative role by enslaving the souls of Shanghai artists to the material values of the market. Actually, since its opening in 1995, the gallery has largely served as a positive force, supporting and stimulating the contemporary art scene in Shanghai at a time of hostility or indifference. After being promoted by this venue, which frequently caters to foreign ambassadors and cultural attachés working in

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55 Shang-Art Gallery moved to its new location in Fuxing Park 复兴公园, next to a high-class restaurant Park '97, on March 18, 1999. For more detailed information, please visit the website http://www.shanghart.com.
56 Iain Roberson, "Emerging markets--Shanghai is taking to meishu (art)," *The art newspaper*, 63 (October 7, 1996), p. 39.
57 Ibid.
Shanghai, some young artists, best exemplified by Zhou Tiehai, have been able to develop connections with art communities outside China, thus, gradually establishing their international careers.

Furthermore, after the cost of living in Shanghai rose rapidly as a result of rapid economic development, earning money from outside sources to make a comfortable living and support artistic activities has become more and more of a distraction from pure art. Therefore, some Shanghai artists decided to enter the gallery system, in the hope that the money they earned from the art market could help "moisten their brushes" (runbi 潤筆); i.e. the income they earned could help them to create new art. For example, by selling his paintings made of ashes and burnt fragments, Xue Song bought himself two adjoining apartments, one to use as his studio, the other for his living quarters. Xue claimed that there was nothing wrong with selling his art so that he could paint in a well-lit studio and spend more time on artistic creation rather than working at other jobs just for the sake of making a living. His work Famous Painting (Minghua 名畫), which was produced in 1998, features the two Chinese characters "famous painting" (名畫), the character for painting (hua 畫) being made from burnt fragments of Chinese currency (plate 4. 15). It is possible to take this work as an exposé or critique of the hidden relationship between fame and profit in the art world, but it can also be considered a visualization of the ever-lasting tradition of "moistening the brush."

In summary, since most major Shanghai artists entered the gallery system after 1995, their relationship with commercialism has become more

58 The term "runbi" has a long tradition in art history, the earliest use of which I found comes from the Sui dynasty. Wei Zheng 魏徵, *Suishu 隋書*, Beijing, 1973, 38.3, p. 1137. In James Cahill, *How artists lived and worked in traditional China*, New York, 1994, this term is frequently used in the author's discussions of how artists in traditional China were involved in the commerce of art. See pp. 4, 54, 61, and 85 for examples.
59 My interview with Xue Song on June 12, 1998.
ambiguous and complex. Selling art is no longer taken simply as a gesture of total compromise, but a frontal engagement with commercialism, a dangerous game in which by relying on one's self-consciousness, moral judgment, and wisdom, one may be able to transform the negative side of money power into a positive force for artistic creation.

In 1996, the senior artist Yu Youhan stopped painting Mao images and started to depict common scenes and ordinary people in contemporary China (see pp. 46-7). One major reason for this artistic shift had much to do with Yu's Maoist-inspired belief that art should fulfill its responsibility to society by presenting the masses and their surrounding reality. On the other hand, it can be seen as an intentional farewell to his Mao Series, a painting genre which achieved a considerable commercial success but also excited much hostility in domestic art circles. Yu's new paintings, now being promoted by the Shang-Art Gallery on the Internet, seem to be left in an unfinished state on purpose, with some areas remaining unpainted and the contours of figures being sketched out rather than delineated in the academic, realistic style. By doing this, does Yu mean to question the uncritical appetite of the consumer society? Or does he mean to restore a moral aloofness to his art by creating something new and not immediately attractive to the ideologically-focused eye? No matter what the answer is, Yu Youhan does not intend to be out of the market completely, for he determines the size for his new paintings in accordance with the convenience of future exhibitors and collectors.60

Ding Yi is able to make a reasonably comfortable living from his Cross paintings, but his tug-of-war with commercialism is constantly evident in his artistic practice. In the beginning of 1997, he began painting cross patterns directly on the surface of tartans. These works represent a marriage of artistic

60 My interview with Yu Youhan on August 16, 1997.
creativity with manufactured products, which in turn gives birth to a new commodity on the level of high culture. In Ding's dangerous game-playing with art and commodity, we witness a pessimistic, but also positive solution to the dichotomy between the two; since the artist cannot escape from the commercialism of the age, the only way he can maintain his artistic purity and value is to elevate the quality of the commodity he produces.

For multimedia and conceptual artists, being promoted by a gallery does not mean that they can become prosperous. Zhou Tiehai's paintings are eagerly sought by foreign collectors, but the fact that he can produce only a limited quantity in one year forces him to work as a free-lance video producer to make ends meet. Nevertheless, gallery promotion does present him opportunities for international exposure, which not only bring him money to realize his conceptual works in overseas venues, but also help to increase the value of his art in the long run.

Heavily indoctrinated with the idea that material pursuits are not the most important thing in life, Zhou finds it impossible to give up his criticism of the commerce of art. In *Now a Mr. Gouriérec Comes To China* (Zhongguo you liale Guleike 中國又來了顧磊克) (plate 4.16), a painting made in 1997 and later produced on a fake cover of *Flash Art Magazine*, playing with commercialism became an unmistakable theme (plate 4.17). Mr. Gouriérec's story is similar to that of Mr. Solomon in the other painting we already examined (see pp. 108-9), and both works examine the effects of Western power on contemporary Chinese art. The first time I saw Zhou's painting, it was still very small (approximately

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61 Zhou Tiehai's creation of art largely depends on the inspirations he draws from real stories happening in his social and personal life. In a conversation with me on January 2, 1999, he said: "No new stories, no new art works." This certainly limits the quantity of his artistic production.

62 Zhou's text on the lower lefthand corner on this painting reads: "Gu Leike (Frédéric le Gouriérec): He majors in French classical literature in the Paris Upper Normal College. In the summer of 1996, he was sent
45 x 45 cm), and contained nothing other than the central figure. When I visited his studio again a couple of weeks later, the small piece had been enlarged into a painting of wall size, emphasizing its theme more dramatically. Zhou also wrote a short dialogue between an enthusiastic collector and himself in its upper righthand corner, explaining the reason for this change and how he effected it:

[A customer asks:] "What is the price of this small painting?"

[Zhou thinks to himself:] "Adding some newspaper around this small painting and brushing some colors onto its surface will make it a large piece."

After thinking for a while, [he] made this painting into one which can be either big or small.63

Set against its huge but empty background, the central part of this work seems ridiculously small. This absurd visual contrast not only demonstrates Zhou's intention to question and ridicule the way in which an art work is priced as a commodity, but also projects his attempt to sustain a moral distance between art as a free conceptual expression and its fate as something on the market.

Ni Weihua is another conceptual artist of the second half of the 1990s, whose work concentrates on the relationship between art and money. In March 1996, Ni, too, participated in the exhibition Under the Name of Art, showing his

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63 For the Chinese text, see Appendix p. 190.
installation Art: A Legitimate Presence of Word and Its Object (Meishu: ci yu wu di hefaihua zaichang 美術: 詞與物的合法化在場). This piece consisted of two shiny bronze Chinese characters for "art" (meishu 美術) written in the standard script (plate 4.18). Facing this piece, one inevitably becomes entangled in all the sophisticated conceptual interplay between the signifier (the word "art") and the signified (the art product itself), between the code associated with academic art in China (the Chinese characters for "art," meishu ) and the context of a contemporary art exhibition in which everything can be justified under the name of "art."64 According to the exhibition curator Zhu Qi, Ni spent sixteen thousand yuan on this work, breaking the record of production costs in contemporary Chinese art circles.65 In this respect, the artist was able to "reduce art history to two characters, which manifest the quality and aura of money power."66

The same idea can be seen in Ni's Borrowing the Paintings: One Privilege, Two Dividing Surfaces (Nuoyong huihua: yici tequan, liangci jiemen 擁用繪畫: 一次特權, 兩次界面), another conceptual piece featured in the '97 Contemporary Shanghai Art Exhibition (plate 4.19). For this work, Ni merely purchased some academic-style commercial oil paintings, which were hung on the exhibition hall's wall. Works of this sort certainly raise questions about the dividing line between installation and painting, art and non-art, and intellectual space and social taste. More importantly, it reveals exactly how the commerce of art has changed profoundly the existence and orientation of artistic expression in Shanghai during this decade.

64 To know more about the ideas behind this piece, see Ni Weihua 倪衛華, "<Meishu: Ci yu wu di hefaihua zaichang>quanshi—changshi zuwei—changshi zuizhe "biaozhun duzhe" er kaojin "zuopin de yitu" 美術: 詞與物的合法化在場—詮釋—嘗試作為“標準讀者”而靠近“作品的意圖”, Dangdai yishu 當代藝術, a photo-copied article provided by the artist but missing the date of publication (approximately 1996), pp. 25, 38.
66 Ibid.
International Dialogue and "Cultural War" -- From 1993

Guoji jiegui

After guoji jiegui 國際接軌 (literally, "international linkup") became the most important policy of the Chinese government in its development of the national economy, Chinese artists started to engage in a dialogue with the Western art world in a way unprecedented in Chinese art history. Since the West's "discovery" of contemporary Chinese art in 1993, frequent and wide international exposure has been a common experience for its avant-garde...
artists, and some of them have participated in the most prestigious art exhibitions in the world.68

During the last decade, Shanghai has become one of the four major contemporary art centers in China (the other three being Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou); and its contemporary artists have made great contributions to the development of this new cultural dialogue. The four artists whom my study focuses on can be taken as the most representative figures in their own city. In 1993, Yu Youhan and Ding Yi participated in the China New Art: Post-1989 exhibition. Afterwards, as two of the best-established contemporary Chinese painters, their works were featured in internationally prestigious biennials and triennials, and have been exhibited on all the world's continents, except Africa and Antarctica. After he resumed his contemporary art practice in 1994, Zhou Tiehai built a promising international career with astonishing speed. From 1997 to the beginning of 1999, his work has been featured in almost twenty overseas venues (equivalent to having an exhibition open outside China once every one and a half months), and this summer his art will be presented at the 48th Venice Biennale. Compared to these three artists, Shi Yong has not had such wide overseas exposure, but his maneuvers to be part of the international dialogue are evident in his practice during the second half of the nineties. Since August 1996, he has not only dealt systematically with the problems involved in this new cultural interaction but has also made an endeavor to expose his artistic concepts and even his self-image to a wide range of overseas audiences in a way that penetrates both space (via the Internet) and time (by appropriating

68 The most prestigious international exhibitions in which Chinese artists were presented include: the 45th and 46th Venice Biennales (1993, 1995), the 22nd, the 23rd and 24th Biennials of Sao Paolo (1994, 1996, and 1998), the Documenta X (1997), and the 1993 Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Australia. For other important information about this, see Chang Tsong-Zung, "Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An insider's view," in Gao Minglu ed., Inside out, pp. 61-75.
historical models). Shi's surging artistic creativity will allow him to have more overseas exposure in the near future.69

Opportunities for showing art overseas have greatly supported and stimulated the contemporary art scene in Shanghai and other parts of China, which otherwise might have been smothered in a social environment fraught with hostility, indifference, "limited conditions" (a problem that Shi Yong discussed), and commercial distractions. The experiences that Chinese artists have in the West update their knowledge of Western art and culture and enable them to adjust, refine, and enrich their artistic vocabularies and concepts, furthering the process of domestic modernization and global pluralism on the cultural level. In this new situation, we see a change in the course of modernism in Chinese artistic circles. "Chinese modernism," which was "rooted in a desire for internal strengthening" previously, "answering only to its own social and cultural demands," now seems to have developed into an open and ambitious "transitional modernism," which aims at international communication, recognition, and contributes to the construction of a rich multicultural world.70 Communication creates understanding and friendship, but also gives rise to misunderstandings and conflict. During this decade when the West has been the main host, patron, and judge of contemporary Chinese art, which lacks a domestic audience and government support, communication between the West and the Chinese art world seems to be problematic and disputatious.

The Rise of Nationalism

69 Shi Yong took part in a group exhibition in Winnipeg in January, 1999, and he will show his work in South Korea and Australia in the spring and summer of this year. My conversation with Shi Yong on January 7, 1999 in Winnipeg.
In 1993, the curator of the 45th Venice Biennale, Achille Bontino Oliva, managed to present the show in an untraditional way by giving exposure to "other" cultures. For the first time, art from countries such as Australia, South Africa, and Korea was brought to Venice. Oliva also visited art studios in China, choosing works by over ten artists to be shown, and this was the first time that avant-garde art from China was presented in such a renowned international art event. Developed along "thematic poles--north/south, east/west--calling attention to the reciprocal influences and the cultural exchange between East and West," this exhibition created a valuable opportunity for the Chinese art world to meet the West, but it also initiated a criticism of Western hegemony among Chinese art circles.\(^71\)

There were several reasons for this. First, since there was no national pavilion for Chinese artists in the Venice Biennale, their works were hosted in the Israeli Pavilion.\(^72\) For some artists, the crowded, dimly lit showing conditions revealed the Western center's discrimination against Third World countries.\(^73\) In addition, most of the works chosen to be shown in this Biennale were of the Political Pop and Cynical Realism styles. As Hou Hanru complained later, this selection reflected the two different standards used by the West to judge Western art and Chinese art, that is, the use of the ontological standard (in which art vocabulary is regarded as the most important element) for the former

\(^{71}\) Giancarlo Politi, Christopher Martin tr., "Bonito Oliva, Documenta, and the Biennale," *Flash art*, 166.10 (October, 1992), p. 87.

\(^{72}\) Sixty countries took part in the 1993 Venice Biennale, but only twenty-eight had their own pavilions. Ibid., p. 143.

and the Cold War ideological standard for the latter. Finally, as China started to become more powerful economically, nationalism re-emerged and grew among Chinese intellectuals.

A nationalistic tendency was evident as early as 1993 in some participating artists’ reactions to this Biennale. Beijing artist Wang Guangyi stated that there was no equality in cultural communication. He emphasized "national spirit" (minzu jingshen 民族精神) and called on the Chinese government, art critics, and artists to take the initiative in creating a "Chinese myth" (Zhongguo shenhua 中國神化) for the sake of achieving an important international position for Chinese culture. In the view of Fang Lijun, the reason why there were so many exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art in Western countries was because "the West intended to subject Chinese art to the order of world art," which, as his words implied, was the order of Western art. Another Beijing artist Feng Mengbo (b. 1966) shared Fang's opinion and further argued that a national identity (minzuxing 民族性) is necessary for the development of contemporary art in China.

In addition to these artists involved directly in the artistic dialogue with the West, Gao Minglu, an influential curator and scholar residing in the United States, supported this nationalist idea in his writings. In 1993, Gao, a doctoral candidate at Harvard University, published a letter with the title "The Battlefield of Chinese Art is Inside China" ("Zhongguo yishu de zhanchang zai Zhongguo bentu" 中國藝術的戰場在本土.) in Jiangsu Art Monthly, writing:

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75 Tian Bin ed., p. 15.
76 Ibid., p. 20.
77 Ibid., pp. 21, 23.
We should not expect the West to recognize our contemporary art. In their position as the mainstream culture, they [the Western audiences] are not willing to and are not going to accept you, particularly when you are following them. We should overcome them with our own strength.\(^7\)

In Gao's view, real communication between East and West is impossible, and a cultural war against the West, suggested by his term "overcome" (zhengfu 征服) becomes an inevitable solution.

If the 1993 Venice Biennale was the beginning of this "cultural war," then the 46th Venice Biennale of 1995 made the situation even tenser. The curator this time, Jean Clair, constructed the show on the theme "Identity and Alterity," focusing on "the historically relative nature of representations of the human body."\(^7\) Although this theme offered "extensive possibilities for escape from the western-centered narratives which have dominated the interpretation of twentieth-century art," the show itself, as some Western writers pointed out, remained Western-centered, since it was dominated by European artists, despite including works by Liu Wei, Zhang Xiaogang, and Yan Peiming 嚴培明 [b. 1960].\(^8\) The three Chinese artists who took part in the show were all recommended by commercial galleries overseas, and the careless and inappropriate way in which some of their works were shown betrayed "a sign of their marginal importance to the overall conception of the exhibition."\(^8\)

The exclusive nature of this exhibition provoked outrage in the Chinese art world, and a cry for combat against Western hegemony resounded in the

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\(^7\) Gao Minglu, "Zhongguo yishu de zhanchang zai Zhongguo bentu", p. 16.
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Liu and Zhang were introduced by Hanart Gallery in Hong Kong, and Yan Peiming 嚴培明, originally from Shanghai, was based in France and represented by a gallery in Paris. Iain Roberston, "Shanghai not yet an art market," p. 37. David Clarke, p. 33.
Their articles attacked the two Biennales as Western curators' conspiracies to control or exclude the art of non-Western people and demonized the West as a united entity, which as the "self," always stood on the side opposed to China, one of the "others." Meanwhile, cultural relations between the West and non-West, the center and the fringe, were frequently discussed by Chinese critics within the frame of the world political structure, since, as the critic Leng Lin 冷林 pointed out: "cultural dialogues inevitably become the core content of the world's political life" in the post-Cold War era.

These antagonistic and ideologically-charged opinions were obviously inspired by national self-respect, which had been insulted by Jean Clair's curatorial decisions. Art critic and scholar Huang Du 黃篤 wrote a review essay after his trip to the 46th Venice Biennale. He stated that it was urgent for China, "a great and cultured nation" (wenhua daguo 文化大國), to have its own national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, since "prestigious international art exhibitions of this sort are analogous to the World Olympics, which can represent a nation's political power and cultural position." To win this cultural war seemed very important for the nationalists; and in articles published in China since 1995, one frequently sees the word "strategy" (celüe 策略) in the theoretical discussions about how to achieve an equal artistic dialogue with the West. Besides general agreement on employing contemporary artistic vocabularies to locate the national identity in artistic expression and content,
some critics also supported the idea of taking state-planned cultural export and import to enforce contemporary Chinese art onto the international art stage. In these cases, they sounded like mouthpieces of the Chinese government, for whom culture seemed to become bargaining chips in political deals.

The Alternative to Nationalism

The four Shanghai artists whom my study has focused on were inevitably caught in the dilemma of choosing between cultural dialogue and war. My earlier discussion of the sharpening of this cultural war in the context of the contemporary Chinese art world as a whole will hopefully offer a necessary background for one to understand their artistic concerns and maneuvers in dealing with this conflict. It will also set up grounds for comparison enabling us to identify how they differ from the nationalistic critics and artists just mentioned. According to all the materials available to me, these four artists seem the most sensitive regarding this issue among the contemporary artists of Shanghai. Since 1993, they have discussed and dealt with this cultural conflict in both their writings and art works. Although they cannot represent all Shanghai artists in this respect, their viewpoints add new dimensions to the study of this problem and to a certain extent reflect the regional characteristics of Shanghai.

85 Tang Di, "Guanyu 1995 nian Weinisi shuangnianzhan de zhutizhan zhi biaoti de jidian shuoming" 關於年威尼斯雙年展之主題展之標題的几點說明, Jiangsu huakan, 196.4 (April, 1997), p. 18; and Huang Du, p. 39. As early as 1993, art critic Kong Chang'an 孔長安 suggested the idea of promoting the "products" of contemporary Chinese art to the international art scene by using export techniques, namely, using the vocabularies and issues attractive to the Western audiences. Kong Chang'an, "Oriental People Should Not Dream (Dongfang ren bubi zuomeng" 東方人不必做夢), Palazzo Ruini, 1 (Spring, 1994), unpaginated, reprinted from the December 1994 issue of Yishu jia 藝術家.
After participating in the 45th Biennale, Yu Youhan expressed his thoughts regarding this unprecedented meeting with the West in written form; but one does not find the disappointment, frustration, or antagonism implied in some other artists’ reactions. Rather, Yu seems to have enjoyed his cultural experience in Venice, where he was moved by the eternity and creativity embodied in the masterpieces of Western art. At the same time, he confirmed the value of the Chinese works featured in the exhibition, pointing out their successful reflection of certain aspects in current Chinese society which made them as valuable as their Western counterparts. According to Yu, the value and international position of contemporary Chinese art works are not decided by Western standards, but rather by their affinity with the society in which they are rooted, and by Chinese artists’ self-confidence in their artistic pursuits. In his view, Western acceptance and recognition should not be a major concern in Chinese art practice. Yu also responded to the nationalistic ideas proclaimed by some Beijing-based artists and critics returning from the Venice Biennale as follows:

This time after we came back some artists talked a lot about national spirit. This requires examination. One kind of these people lacks self-confidence and wants to "play the China card" with the aim of finally being acknowledged by the Western audience. I think that is not necessary... , and I hope that no one will write out this sort of prescription for our entire art movement.86

Yu’s artistic practice tries to locate the affinity of his work with the social life of Chinese people, and in this sense, his artistic method is in line with that promoted by some critics, namely, using contemporary vocabularies to locate

and reflect the national identity. However, the reason why he does this has little to do with any strategy in the "cultural war" against the West, but rather in order to create a new identity for Chinese art that will be familiar to, and valid for the Chinese people. This difference can be demonstrated by his artistic shift from the Political Pop style which had attracted the broad interest of Western audiences to new, low-profile works depicting ordinary scenes and images in China. After this shift, the national identity he searched for in his art was no longer a clichéd, and Western-favored one with national politics or political history as its essence; rather, it changed and was reconstructed constantly as a result of the artist's close observation of the rich, everyday life. At a time when the voice of overcoming the Western hegemonic center through strategic "cultural war" was prevalent in Chinese art circles, Yu Youhan's approach offered another possibility to solve this conflict: Chinese art should seek a self-sufficient existence in domestic soil, for it is not an appendage and has no reason to measure its value according to its proximity or distance from the Western center.

Differing from his teacher, Ding Yi paid close attention to this problematic cultural dialogue between China and the West. In his letters written in 1995, this problem seemed to be on his mind constantly, and in one of these, he wrote:

At present, world-wide exhibitions of Chinese avant-garde art are unequal, since the recognition of Chinese art is decided by the ideologically-grounded response of the Western audience on the media level, but not by any solid scholarly standard of art. Thus, it will be very dangerous if you do not jump out of this circle and look at the situation from a broader perspective.87

87 Ding Yi's letter to me, written on April 6, 1995, p. 2.
In the same letter, Ding also pointed out that avant-garde art should challenge universal issues, and that it would be very narrow-minded if Chinese artists only concern themselves with Chinese identity in their art.88

In another letter, written one month later, Ding gave more consideration to how truly equal artistic communication between East and West can be achieved.89 His suggestion was to discard two existing norms of making art in the non-Western art world: namely, the regionalist approach of showing off one's traditional heritage and the subjective over-use of one's cultural and political identity.90 This idea was possibly inspired by the Shanghai art critic Wu Liang's article "Does a Center Exist?" ("You meiyou yige zhongxin de cunzai" 有沒有一個中心的存在), written in 1992.91

In his writings, Ding Yi showed his clear awareness of the problems involved for both sides of the cultural dialogue. He certainly had a very different idea from Yu Youhan regarding what Chinese artists should express, writing: "Art truly becomes a scholarly pursuit regardless of the background or identity, I think this is the ideal of art."92 During this decade, this artistic ideal has been pursued consistently by Ding Yi in his Cross Series, where a simple but universal visual vocabulary has been discovered, studied, reiterated, and explored.

The Minimalist composer, Philip Glass has described his music as "a kind of 'presence', freed of dramatic structure, a pure medium of sound...one in which neither memory nor anticipation has a place in sustaining the musical

88 Ibid.
89 Ding Yi's letter to me, written on May 3, 1995, p. 1.
90 Ibid.
91 Wu Liang, "You meiyou yige zhongxin de cunzai?—guanyu Zhongguo dangdai yishu de chujing" 有沒有一個中心的存在?—關於中國當代藝術的處境, Yishu chaoliu, 2.2 (February, 1993), pp. 39-41.
Ding Yi's work certainly offers us a visual parallel to what Glass describes here, its basic unit being neither cultural, regional, nor political, but something purely visual and mental, which can resonate in the souls of all human beings. If, as suggested by Wu Liang, making art a conjunction of the individual's sensations and a universal experience is a constructive solution to Chinese-Western cultural conflict, then Ding Yi, along with two other Shanghai artists, Qin Yifeng and Shen Fan, can serve as good examples.

As we have already seen, Yu Youhan tried to create a new identity for Chinese art, which was not based on the preconceived political and ideological identity favored by the Western audience, while Ding Yi totally rejected the idea of a separate national identity in favor of a universalistic view of art. However, in Shi Yong and Zhou Tiehai's works one can find a clear identity for Chinese artists, which is an ironic reaction to Western assumptions about Chinese culture and the power that the Western center exercises on Chinese artists. According to their art, a problematic Western center does seem to exist, but their strategic battle against it has already been examined in Chapter Three.

In the *Asian Wall Street Journal*'s interview with Zhou Tiehai, Zhou complained frankly that what Western audiences want to see most of all in contemporary Chinese art is democratic thoughts providing examples of opposition to the Chinese Communist Party. He further claimed that: "He cannot wait until the 'Chinese' is dropped from in front of 'artist,' since 'the Chinese label is a political label.'" Zhou's art practice managed to avoid the simple "Chineseness" required by the West, replacing it with another Chinese identity that might touch a sore point in his Western viewers.

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94 Wu Liang, "You meiyou yige zhongxin de cunzai?", p. 41
95 Mishi Saran, "The artist is on the cover," p. 11.
96 Ibid.
Shi Yong's works produced since 1997 systematically appropriate Western-favored images of contemporary Chinese art to make a parody of Western notions concerning China. In his most recent piece, *The "New Image" of Shanghai Today* (*Jinri Shanghai xin xingxiang* 今日上海新形象), a performance given in Winnipeg in January of 1999, Shi, who was dressed the same as in his piece on Kosuth's chair, took Polaroid photographs of himself together with anyone in his audience who was willing to pay a dollar fee, or two dollars if he put his hand on their shoulders (plate 4.20). Seeing the many excited Westerners taking pictures with this new Chinese image, even some Western viewers were struck by the sarcasm embodied in the scene -- Western viewers were both the creators *and* consumers of the new Chinese identity! 97

In other parts of China, we may find some artists questioning and attacking the hegemonic Western center in their writings, but they seldomly do so in their works of art. Thus, we can hardly find a match for Zhou Tiehai or Shi Yong, whose works not only systematically focus on and criticize the problematic cultural relationship between China and the West, but also comment sarcastically on their own problems as Chinese artists in this cultural exchange. Unlike those Beijing critics and artists, Zhou and Shi have never related themselves to the ambitious nationalist ideal of competing with the West on the cultural (or political) stage. By exposing this issue sharply and humorously in their art, they aim at bringing about some new understanding and positive change to this problematic cultural relationship. As a matter of fact, exposure of Zhou's and Shi's critical works in Western venues do prove that the Western art world is more tolerant of outsiders than some of the Beijing artists have admitted. More importantly, it shows that the Shanghai artists' creations have

97 *My conversation with a Western viewer during this performance.*
started to help some Western viewers examine and perhaps rectify their preconceptions about the culture of the "other."

The exhibition Looking Out/Looking In, held in Plug In Gallery in Winnipeg, can be seen as an good example of this phenomenon. Opening on January 6 of 1999, this show featured works by four Shanghai artists, Zhou Tiehai, Shi Yong, Hu Jieming 胡介鳴 (b. 1957), and Ding Yi. Ding showed abstract paintings, but the works of the others were all characterized by the irony directed at Western preconceptions and the economics and politics involved in the East-West cultural dialogue. In addition to Zhou Tiehai's photo-based Press Conference and Shi Yong's video installation Adding One Concept on Top of Another and his performance The New Image of Shanghai Today, Hu Jieming's video New Journey to the West (Xin xiyou ji 新西遊記) was also shown, a piece appropriating approximately twenty minutes of footage from the Chinese television series Journey to the West (Xiyou ji 西遊記), based on a classical story about a monk and his three disciples trudging to India to learn the essence of Buddhism. During his residence in Vancouver's Western Front Artist Run Center in 1998, Hu asked three Chinese-Canadians (two artists Gu Xiong 顧雄 and Lin Jingshan 林景山 and one art dealer Zheng Shengtian 鄭勝天) as well as some Western curators and artists to improvise dialogues for the appropriated footage. As a result, the original story was transformed into a new one about a contemporary pilgrimage of Chinese artists to New York, involving Green Cards, grant money, solo exhibitions, and so forth!

As far as I know, this was the first exhibition of contemporary Chinese art held in the West, which focused on exposing the problems usually concealed under the seemingly harmonious cover of East-West cultural communication. Tim Schouten, the curator, is a Canadian artist who visited Shanghai in 1997, and the realization of the show offers an example of further understanding reached
between Western and Chinese artists on the basis of their common experience and communication. In various reviews of the show, we also begin to see some new perspectives of the Western media and audiences, which are beginning to examine the way they look at the "others." For example, in his discussion of the exhibition, the critic Robert Enright pointed out that "the broader question being asked is what being Chinese means to a white audience."98 Another critic, Christopher Olson, concluded:

Until then, you're guaranteed to leave Plug In with an aching (or spinning) head, after being forced to examine your own assumptions and stereotypes of what contemporary Chinese art would or should look like.99

Obviously, the works by these Shanghai artists, which present a self-consciously constructed inner view of themselves arrived at after looking out at the West, also offer a site for Western audiences to examine themselves after looking out at China. Works of this sort might cause "headaches," but they also prove that the boundary between the "self" and the "other," or between the center and the fringe, can be shifted and blurred. The fact that Zhou Tiehai and Shi Yong's works (of this sort) will be featured in the most prestigious international exhibitions this summer allows one to be optimistic that equal communication and understanding may be achieved more quickly than expected.100

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99 Christopher Olson, "Hey, they've got irony in China, too--Plug In exhibit challenges Western preconceptions," The Manitoban, 84.14 (January 20, 1999), p. 16.
100 Zhou Tiehai will show his Press Conference and other new works in the 1999 Venice Biennales; and Shi Yong will be presented in the 1999 Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Australia this May. My interviews with them on January 7, 1999.
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*Xue Song zuopin ji (diyijuan)* 薛松作品集 (第一卷). Shanghai, 1997.


Appendix I Chinese Texts

(According to the number of the footnote. For example, 1.2. is the second footnote of Chapter One).

Chapter One

1.2. 無排它和反省的被動化的心理障礙, 卻以極大的心理承受態度, 形成文化包容的主動化的迎合和效應。

1.26. 用藝術的力量調劑他們的思想, 安慰他們的精神。

1.31. 我們承認繪畫決不是自然的模倣, 也不是死板的形骸的反覆, 我們要用全生命來赤裸裸地表現我們潑刺的精神。

我們以爲繪畫決不是宗教的奴隸, 也不是文學的說明, 我們要自由地綜合地構成純造型的世界。

我們厭惡一切舊的形式, 舊的色彩, 厭惡一切平凡的低級的技巧, 我們要用新的技法來表現新時代的精神。

1.40. 每個藝術家有權選擇藝術創造的表現形式。

1.47. 具備一種逼迫觀衆接受新事物的正面沖擊力。

1.49. 上海從沒一個畫展如此人滿爲患, 更沒一個畫展遭受到如此人爲的作品破壞和不知名者的參與, 創造。

1.50. "85 運動以來最爲激進的表演藝術展

1.51. 內心深處的壓力, 痛苦和不安。

Chapter Two

2.1. 圖像的匱乏將會得到改變, 在壓力最終消除時, 自由的形式必然會解放出來。

2.9. 用點, 也表現了老子的思想: "道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物。"

2.12. 一個最適合表達他概念的形式, 與此同時這個形式本身又擁有自身的意味。
2.21. 現實，政治現象，大眾趣味，崇拜，偶像 ...等等。

2.25. 大約在八時年代後期，我覺得“圈地”更好，但它太“象牙之塔”了，和人民，和社會沒有關係。（是嗎？）我想推動社會前進！（現在看起來有點可笑）所以我放棄了圈，改畫風為“Pop.”“毛”圈地對於圈來講是細部，它表現的是我生活的具體時代，從49年到80年代（從我六歲到四十歲）中國社會，中國人民的社會，政治和精神生活。

2.35. 我感興趣的是藝術的本質：我認為好的藝術一定是從生活中來的，而且這種生活不僅是藝術家個人的小生活，而是與時代相聯繫的人民群衆的大生活。因此...近年來...我也嘗試著表現普通老百姓

2.44. 象1+1=2一樣完整，確定。

2.48. 重生律中色彩的原慕：色的平庸，熾爛，光芒，及色與色並置所產生的新穎。

2.49. 技巧已經阻礙了藝術實現正常的進步。一件作品的技巧只能表達某種認識已經陳腐。

2.54. 一個是他們和普通人的生活比較接近，還有就是它本身的簡單感很適合用我的方式來表現...很多人看到扇子覺得漂亮，所以他們對這樣的畫有一個啓發性的了解。

2.57. 許：如果有一個企業想成批生產你的作品，你會怎麼想？

丁：這對藝術家是非常麻煩的事情。因為你肯定要和某種商業體系發生關係，要談判啊要控制這種局面啊。如果你不控制局面，肯定就不是一個藝
術的行爲過程, 它變成了另外一種東西, 就是一個花布的品種, 可能就和藝術無關了。

2.58. 我覺得很爲難, 不知道和他們合作好, 還是遠離這樣的事好, 現在還沒有結論。

2.60. 作品本身的自律性力量使藝術家在語言結構和外延觀念的深層邏輯之中工作, 其結果反映出藝術實現自身的本質和意義的無限需要。

2.62. 在美術館的個展效果非常好, 很多人都認爲是今年美術館最好的展覽, 我也很滿意有這樣一個由 65 件作品組成的大型展覽。

2.65. 不客氣的講, 我們的美術界孜孜以求的正是這種心靈自由, 形式自然的飽滿的所謂的繪畫性。

2.67. 丁乙的開放的藝術關點支配他朝向了一個原來的中心藝術區域, 現已蛻變為庸俗繪畫地帶的非藝術邊緣...那好中之美妙其實就是一個行之有效的催眠術, 它的催眠作用有可能讓藝術家在觀賞者醒來後自己卻還沉睡夢鄉。

Chapter Three

3.5. 就藝術的某種傾向而言, 拒絕給予象徵與隱喻的承諾是必要的, 因爲它們被過度的享用了。雖然在某種意義上藝術是一種意識形態, 但它應來自作品的內部。

3.6. 有了觀衆, 作品就能夠更爲充實, 完整。

3.9. 超負越載的拋負與脆弱可變的現實之間的矛盾心理。

3.12. 至於那種足以使百分之九十九的觀衆所忽略的對光影感覺的細膩展示和脆弱到剛開展便忽然坍塌的平衡系統, 大抵便是對這種內向的敏感與外放的過敏的放大傳達。

3.15. 重要的是裝置的有效性, 是對觀衆還是對作者?

3.16. 在這裏, 交流聯絡既是一種形式, 同時也是一種內容。
3.22. 我想這種 "限制性" 處境不僅是一個發展中國家面臨的問題，西方也同樣面臨，比如對文化開支的大量削減等等。這意味著，藝術也許會走向一種非常經濟化，小規模且易展覽的方式，(主要的是藝術表達的是一個概念)...總之，這次溫哥華之行給我的感受很大。

3.23. 進一步地隨著思考的深入，我發現這種 "限制性" 本身，並非只是一個經濟性的問題，它實際上還涉及到一個制度，即特有的另一種意識形態限制的問題。而這正是我國一種特殊的文化處境。

3.27. 既保持獨立的個性，又反映新時代的精神風貌。

3.28. 一件被精心策劃，按西方中心主義立場判斷非常 "中國的" 衣服可以安全地變成處境與身份的一種表征概念上的資源特權 (以西方立場的多元文化主義下的某種新文化分類學正在給於其表征概念以優先權)。

3.30. 這便是由多元文化保証下的非中心圈文化的一種交流現實。

3.32. 在一個充滿話語策略與媒體操作的今日現實里，這個被視為精神之旅的旅行箱，已不再是關於精神意義上的出走，而僅僅是關於製造 "精神出走"的一種文化的表達：一個舞臺，一個形象，一個道具，一個表演者。當它以冷靜的 '立場' 遠離與拒絕一種有問題的權力中心時，它的聲音卻始終不曾也不打算離開這樣一個權力中心的現場。

3.40. 尼采死了，我是中國的尼采!
3.41. (最後以楊旭周鐵海的裸體表演結束,) 一舉把反藝術推進到徹底反文明，反文化的層次。
3.43. 將這種不滿投射到廢棄的報紙上。
3.44. 近年來資本主義藝術觀人生觀昌風盛行,...藝術已到了被資產階級反動派隨意擺布的地步。故我們要堅持與現代派，後現代派徹底決裂！
3.45. 鋒芒指向資產階級...創造各種人物幫助群衆推動歷史
3.48. 在周鐵海和楊旭的作品中, 既有對於當代文化和藝術中的虛假做作的批判, 又有爲自身的權利而抗爭的精神追求。
3.51. 偉大的索羅門陛下, 不遠萬里, 乘風破浪來到神州. 他用那炯炯有神的目光, 從南到北, 透視著邊遠地區的人民的心和肺。
3.64. 各位旅客, 我們很抱歉的通知大家, 由於飛往卡塞爾的 LF1170 航班, 由於天氣的原因延遲起飛, 什麼時後起飛, 我們會隨時通知大家, 謝謝！
3.70. 藝術家就象戰士, 不管喜歡不喜歡, 都必須遵守規則, 必須去打仗。

Chapter Four

4.1. 90年代的色彩和光線正變得曖昧, 在激進主義行存時, 這個時代也同時兼有平庸, 憂鬱主義, 媚俗和烏托邦。但惟其如此, 藝術才變得更有意味。
4.13. 反映了融入個人文化中的歷史現象。
4.15. 在我的作品中, 毛澤東這個形象的含義是不同的: 有時他代表中國, 有時代表東方, 有時他代表文化, 有時代表領導人, 有時他代表進步, 有時又代表保守, 有時他只是一個裝飾性的圖案。
4.24. 我相信, 一物與它物之間的中介有某種存在...這 "存在" 不在物體之後背, 亦不在頭腦里, 他正在作品中徐徐地顯現。
4.25. 主題, 謎底, 文化介入, 私人隱喻, 歷史線索
4.33. 借用市場手段來繼續推進八十年代初產生的現代主義藝術思潮的發展。
4.43. 當一個觀念藝術家選擇了行為，表演或裝置的形式時，也就意味著他的選擇將不爲學院和市場所接受...那也就意味著他與公衆趣味和社會規範處於敵對的位置。

4.44. 本年度裝置藝術行爲藝術的探索增加是顯而易見的...從效果上來講是反商業的。

4.62. 顧磊克 (Frédéric Le Gouriérec)

他就讀於法國巴黎高等師範學院法蘭西古典文學專業。一九九六年夏天，
受路易威登委託來中國，在北京、上海，杭州爲五十多個藝術家，批評家行
醫診斷...

4.63. 這張小畫要拍多少？

在這張畫周圍加些報紙，刷上些顏色，就是一張大畫。

想了一下，就作成一個大小可取的作品。

4.66. 將藝術史簡化至只剩下兩個詞，並用金錢的質感充實之。

4.78. 我們不應該指望西方人去承認我們的現代藝術，他們站在自己的主流文
化的位置上根本不會也不願去承認你，更何況你是尾隨他們的。我們應
用自己的實力去征服他們。

4.83. 文化對話將不可避免的成為世界政治生活中的中心內容。

4.84. 像我們這樣一個 "文化大國" 不主動參加如此的國際大展是沒有道理的，
它如同 "奧林匹克運動會" 一樣顯示的是一個國家的政治勢力和在國際上
的文化勢態。

4.86. 這次回來有些藝術家大講民族精神，這里面要分析，有一種是對自己過於
沒有自信心，他想打中國牌，目的還是要讓西方人點頭，我覺得這沒有必
要...我希望不要任何一個人給我們整個的運動開藥方。
4.87. 眼下中國前衛藝術在世界各地的展覽是在不平等狀態下的，它首先是以意識形態為背景的新聞層次的反響和被確認，而不是實質性的學術認可。所以當你面對這個問題而跳出這個圈子宏觀地來看待它，那是很危險的。

4.92. 藝術在真正意義上成為一種沒有身份背景的學術，我想這是藝術的理想。


2.5. Yu Youhan. *Abstract 90-8*. 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 97x82.5cm.


Collage of oil on canvas and photograph, 145x105cm.
Acrylic on canvas, 110x90cm.

Acrylic on canvas, 110x90cm.

2.15. Yu Youhan. Deng Xiaoping: No. 2. 1996. Acrylic on canvas, 110x90cm.
2.16. Yu Youhan. Deng Xiaoping; No. 3. 1996. Acrylic on canvas, 110x90cm.

2.17. Yu Youhan. Deng Xiaoping; No. 4. 1996. Acrylic on canvas, 110x90cm.
Oil on thick paper, 57x69cm.

Oil on canvas, 78.5x95cm.

Oil on canvas, 84x84cm.
2. 27. Ding Yi. Cross 91-1. 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 120x140cm.


2.44. Ding Yi. Cross 95-B40. 1995. Charcoal and chalk on paper, 56x76cm.
3.1. Shi Yong with his *Sleeper*. 1990. Oil on canvas, 149x120cm.


Mixed media on cardboard, 44x33cm.

Mixed media on cardboard, 44x33cm.

3.11. Shi Yong.
*Lifting Objects Five Degrees and Bringing About the Volumes of Shadows.*
Installation with photosensitive paper, plexiglass, spotlight and spray-paint.
Installation with sheet iron, gypsum powder and spray-paint.
Installation with sheet iron, gypsum power, video image of a rolling fan and spray-paint.
Performance in the Shanghai urban area. Left: one side of the postcard, with photographs and a map of the itinerary documenting the performance; right: the other side of the postcard, showing written instructions of this performance.
3.21. Shi Yong. *Appropriating the Site: Body, Sound and Form*. 1995. Installation set up in the Access Artist-Run Center, Vancouver. On the right side of this photograph, we see the entrance to Qian Weikang's *Gravity Corridor*.

Media piece reproduced in the magazine and circulated in postcards.

Still short from the video piece, showing a part of a blurry female face.

Installation with table, chairs, old suitcase, speaker, tape-recorder and amplifier.

On the right side of this photograph, we see Shi Yong's *A Plan for an Image Survey* on the wall and his *An Art Sample from China* placed against the Wall.
Video installation based on the result of Shi Yong’s Internet Survey and Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs.*


below: detailed view, fake *Newsweek* covers. 1996. C-print, (each) 87x60cm.
Four still shorts of the nineteen-minute, black-and-white silent film.
Zhou Tiehai's flag "VALE ARTE" bids farewell to art while the Old World links with new Asian 'Cities on the Move' at an exhibition in the Secession in Vienna.

Der Künstler posiert als Killer


Computer-generated image reproduced in Facts magazine.
If you want to know how the West sees Shanghai, read *Time*, *Der Spiegel*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal* etc.

If you want to know the view of a Shanghai artist, see the next page.


**New Listing, Zhou Tiehai, Rises On Debut Before Reaching Fair Value**

*Shanghai*

When first listed July 12 on the Shanghai Stock Exchange, Zhou Tiehai appeared undervalued, rising only slightly in the first few hours of trade.

But Class B* shares in the issue appreciated steadily over the next two weeks, as foreign buyers learned more about the enterprise's fundamentals. One European buyer even was rumoured to be accumulating large blocks of the stock in a bid to obtain a majority stake, traders said.

The gradual appreciation accelerated into an all-out buying spree beginning on July 26, when the unnamed European buyer discovered previously undisclosed assets in Zhou Tiehai. The stock closed out the month just below a psychological high. Traders then said they doubted the stock would rise much further.

"If the Zhou climbs much higher it will find itself very vulnerable to market fluctuations and exposed to the whims of profit-takers," said a market analyst with a Shanghai-based securities firm.

Yet an injection of new funds on Aug. 6 caused the stock to soar on strong buying again rumoured to originate from Europe. The initial surge was followed by three to four days of consolidation in the value of the stock. Traders said it was a technical correction, ending on Aug. 10.

The Zhou fell slowly over the next few sessions, as the European buyer, realising its investment had become overvalued, took some profits.

By Aug. 13, the Zhou had fallen to more sustainable level, before its shares were suspended from trading ahead of a shareholders meeting.

When trading resumed Aug. 26, the Zhou took a slight knock, consolidating on Aug. 27 to a level just below its pre-suspension price.

According to market participants, the stock is now valued fairly in the eyes of the big houses and seems likely to remain stable in the foreseeable future.

Its fundamentals remain sound, and bullish traders expect renewed interest by overseas buyers to bring the Zhou Tiehai higher in the long term. Indeed, some traders said they have seen indications in recent sessions that foreign houses are accumulating the Zhou again.

Shanghai has two stock markets. Class B shares are denominated in US dollars and tradable only by overseas investors; Class A shares, denominated in yuan, are available only to domestic Chinese buyers.

Oil on canvas, 200x200cm.

Oil on canvas, 150x150cm.
Li Shan. The Rouge Series: No. 8, 1990.
Acrylic on canvas, 105.4 x 147.3 cm.

Oil on rice paper, 19cm x 81cm x 5.
Mixed media on paper, 120x76cm.

4.11. below: Song Haidong. 94-43. 1994.
Water, color, dust on cardboard, 60x45cm.
Acrylic on canvas, 114.5x151.7cm.

Acrylic and collage on canvas, 120x100cm.
Computer-generated image, 26.8x20cm.
Installation with copper, plastic board and iron frame, 340x640cm.
In front of this piece is Shi Yong's *Please Do Not Touch* "Please Do Not Touch."