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**Playing Cards with Cézanne:
How the Contemporary Artists of China Copy and Recreate**

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**Playing Cards with Cézanne:
How the Contemporary Artists of China Copy and Recreate**

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**Playing Cards with Cézanne:
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My dissertation investigates the concepts and techniques of “copying” and appropriation in contemporary Chinese art, which, despite its phenomenal growth, has seldom been credited as original. Critics either condemn the Chinese artists’ willingness to appropriate from others as a lack of individuality, or declare it as a peculiarly “Chinese” quality. This paper, instead, argues that the Chinese artists deliberately adopt such “copying” as a visual strategy, in order to reexamine the traditions they “borrowed”, to reflect on their own cultural status in the modern world, and to challenge the conventional concept of originality—namely, to show that originality is not created by irreducible individuality or mystified inspiration, but by the author’s choice as well as manipulation of contexts. This strategy, I argue, is essential to the proper evaluation and interpretation of contemporary Chinese artworks.

The first two chapters of my dissertation focus on laying out the context from which this art grows. I review how the ideas, styles and institutional structures of western

modern art were imitated, questioned and redefined by the Chinese artists, from 1978 to the present; I then examine the conceptual complexity of originality and “copying” in the theories of modernism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and in traditional Chinese art.

The next two chapters focus on, respectively, calligraphy and photography in contemporary Chinese art, both of which contain the paradox between originality and “copying” in their very nature. The works of four artists, Xu Bing, Qiu Zhijie, Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi, are discussed in details. Xu's site-specific reproduction of “pseudo characters” manage to engage its targeted audiences, psychologically and physically; Qiu's obsessive yet futile copying of a canon of calligraphy returns the act of writing to its essence—a physical pursuit of one's spiritual state of being; Hong's photographic emulation of an ancient masterpiece suggests that painting may excel photography in its ability to portray a grand cityscape; Zhao's simulacrum of pop culture paradigms enables him to evade political censorship, and to have an substantial yet ironic impact in a broader public sphere. Each of these works has made a unique contribution to the redefinition of artistic originality.

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Introduction

I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cezanne, and the Traditions of Copying

In January 1991, the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California held an exhibition entitled “I Don’t Want to Play Cards with Cézanne”, and Other Works, which marked the very first group exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in the United States.

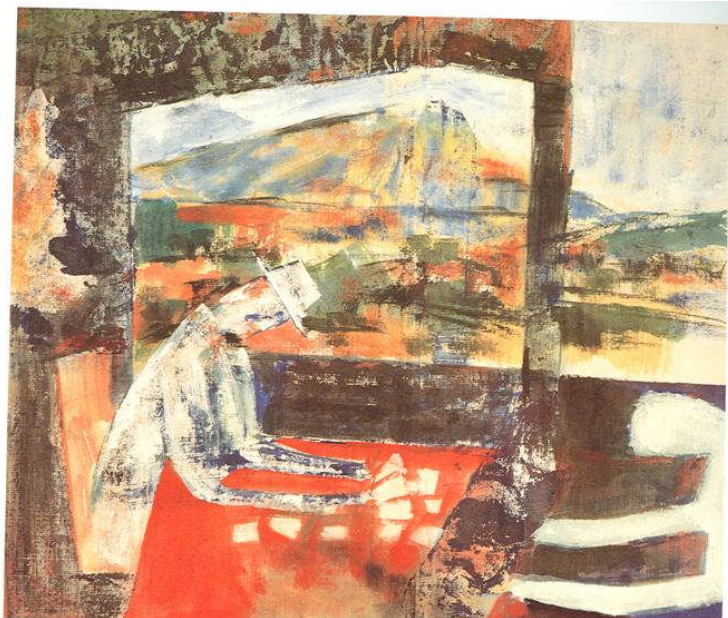


Figure. 1 Li Chao, *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*, 1988. Gouache on paper, 16 ³/₄ × 20 in.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is a rather odd painting by the young Shanghai artist Li Chao (born. 1962), depicting two sketchy, caricatured figures playing cards under what appears to be an open window (Fig. 1). The player on the left leans forward ponderously, while the one on the right—a white silhouette positioned on a lower horizon—pushes the

edge of the window away from himself; his head bowed low, and his cards scattered on the table in front of him. The scene in the window is a rough copy of Cézanne's famous portrayal of Mont Sainte Victoire; the painting itself, as one may easily detect, also appropriates from Cézanne's another well-known painting *The Card Players*, although the compositional structure has been changed drastically, and little effort has been made to simulate the subtlety of the original. The painting, it appears, is meant to serve as an illustration for its title: *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*.

Apparently, the curators of the exhibition believed that this painting captured the sentiment many Chinese artists felt at the time—an anxiety about how to employ western modernism, the influence of which has become overwhelming in China during the 1980s, in their own artistic creations. The figure on the right—representing the subject “I” in the title—is trying to pushing Cézanne's away, but he performs this gesture of rejection with a sense of reverence, looking more exhausted than rebellious. Also, the subject “I” does not reveal anything new after turning away from the old—the same scene of Mont Sainte Victoire continues beyond the sliding frame. Most importantly, the painting still “copies” from the tradition it ostensibly rejects—not faithfully, but in ludicrous redundancy and with arbitrary alterations. Richard E. Strassberg, the curator in charge, thus comments on Li's painting:

Whereas the traditional Chinese approach would study a great master by making an exact, reverential copy in order to absorb both his form and spirit, Li's alterations are designed to signify a refusal to be overwhelmed by such influence. In his search for a possible imagery, he asserts an unwillingness to take on the burden of Western art history as a substitute for the burden of Chinese art history. The answer to this problem of how to employ Modernism may lie somewhere “in the cards”, but it is

obviously not in the hand that artist feels he is being dealt. (Strassberg 28)

While acknowledging the tradition of “making an exact reverential copy” of the old masterpieces in China, Strassberg correctly points out that Li Chao’s painting deliberately distances itself from such a tradition—moreover, it questions the authority of the very “original” it copies from. Li’s altered copy of Cézanne, as Strassberg argues, reflects a common condition of the Chinese artists, who have difficulty creating an art of their own under the burden of both Chinese and western art history. Copying, in this circumstance, seems to be the most feasible solution.

I don’t Want to Play Cards with Cézanne, together with its author Li Chao, has long slipped out of the overcrowded memory of contemporary Chinese art, but the anxiety over the burden of traditions—both western and Chinese—is still acutely felt by the artists today, who, paradoxically, still routinely “copy” from such traditions in their own artistic productions. Up until the late 20th century, critics from the Western art world often tended to see contemporary Chinese artworks as mostly “derivatives” of western art (Erickson, 2002, 106)—a claim that is, as I will further demonstrate in the first chapter, biased but far from groundless. However, in recent years, more and more artists, critics and collectors, especially those with in-depth knowledge in contemporary Chinese art, began to see the practice of copying in a more positive and nuanced manner. Frank Uytterhaegen, the business director of the famous China Art Archives & Warehouse, said in an interview: “Now many people say that Chinese contemporary art is copying or plagiarizing Western art, repeating what has been done before. But this is not a fraud

committed by these artists, because it might be a way they express themselves.”¹ Qiu Zhijie, an acclaimed artist and critic in China, once remarked on a press conference of his own exhibition that the repetitive copying of letters in the art of calligraphy was deeply rooted in the Chinese psyche, and copying a masterpiece dozens of times in order to achieve the same quality was seen as the normal way of learning; therefore it was natural that the Chinese artists today saw no harm in copying Western works². Uli Sigg, the biggest collector and one of the most influential figures of Chinese contemporary art today, describes the same phenomenon less bluntly. In his conversation with Frehner in 2005, he remarked that “despite the fact that from the Asian point of view that copying is a sign of intelligence”, the best artists in China “derive their innovative potential” from a variety of references, including the traditions of both Chinese art and Western art (Fibicher and Frehner, 16).

All those comments lead to a series of interesting yet largely unexplored questions in contemporary Chinese art: how do the Chinese artists “express themselves” through the copying of others, and why do they choose to express themselves this way? Is it true that they inherit this willingness to copy from the Chinese tradition? What differentiates their copying from plagiarism or “fraud”? And how do they develop their “innovative potential” from this practice, if they indeed do? Again, Li Chao's “copying” of Cezanne

1 An interview with Zhu Qi at The Beijing Art Archives & Warehouse, on May 24, 2002. A record of this interview, in Chinese, is published on <http://cn.cl2000.com/visit/frank/wen.shtml> and translated by myself. Uytterhaegen, together with Ai Weiwei and Han van Dijk, also co-founded the Modern Chinese Art Foundation in 1997, which remains one of the most important funding resources for artists today.

2 From the speech Qiu gave on his exhibition *Let There Be Light* at Grace Li Gallery at Zurich, November 3 to December 31, 2006. The press release of this exhibition is available at http://www.graceligallery.com/exhibition/11_let_there_be_light/let_there_be_light_press_release.pdf.

helps to inform answers to those questions. First, the type of copying Chinese artists are engaged in today usually does not aim to “achieve the same quality” as the original pieces; instead, it serves more like a comment on the original, with clearly ironic intentions. Secondly, the Chinese artists often employ such ironic copying to reflect on their own positions in the art world, as well as on the conditions of Chinese society at large, in which the appropriation of Euro-American cultural prototypes has become a common practice. Lastly, the proliferation of copying in Chinese art is partly due to the influence of Postmodern Western art, in which the prevalence of reproduction and appropriation has long replaced the Modernist “cult for originality”. Li Chao's awkward appropriation of the iconic Cézanne, for example, was probably inspired by western artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, whose exhibition at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1985 caused quite a stir in the art community at the time (Gao, 2005, 371).

Copying or appropriation, after all, is far from an exclusively “Chinese” practice in art. It is a complex concept, consisting of a variety of traditions and techniques, and the Chinese artists often adopt them deliberately to form a unique visual strategy. They use such strategy to serve a number of purposes: to move the “original” to a different context, and therefore to reinterpret it from a new perspective; to put modern and traditional, Chinese and western conventions into an illuminating contrast; and, most of all, to question the idea of originality itself, to investigate what art is, and could be, in the context of contemporary China. My research in Chinese art focuses on the interpretation of such strategies; my dissertation, developed from this research, attempts to be a study of the concepts as well as practices of copying in contemporary Chinese art.

Contemporaneity: Definition and Revision

Before delving into the subject, I want to first define the field of my research, to explain the contribution my research has made to this field, and to identify the resources and methodology I use in this project. The “contemporary art” (*dangdai yishu*) I deal with refers to a body of artworks emerged after 1978, created by a group of artists who intentionally separate themselves from the political, academic and traditional art of China. This art is also called, alternatively, as “modern” (*xiandai*), “avant-garde” (*xianfeng* or *shiyuan*) and “experimental” (*shiyuan*), each of those terms originated from its specific contexts. In the 1980s, both the artists and critics explicitly associated themselves with western modern art, which, in their definition, included almost every school of Euro-American art after Impressionism. Naturally, they called their own art “modern” or “modernist” (*xiandai pai*). At the same time, they also used “modern” as virtually interchangeable with “avant-garde”—a usage that, though apparently problematic, was common in the cultural field at the time³. As many critics have pointed out, this body of artworks were probably not truly “modern” or “avant-garde”, as they identified with the styles and concepts that had long become past in the West (Wu, *Reinterpretations*, 13), and even advocated a sentimental humanism in art that seemed “tame, possibly nostalgic” to the mainstream modern western art (Strassberg, 25). But on the other hand, those

3 The indiscriminate use of “modern” and “avant-garde” in the 1980s is best exemplified by the “China/Avant-Garde Exhibition” (*Zhongguo xiandai yishu zhan*) held in February, 1989, the largest exhibition of the “New Wave Art” (*xinchao meishu*) during the 1980s. The title “*xiandai*”, meaning modern, is translated as “avant-garde” by its organizers. “Modern” and “avant-garde” were also used indiscriminately on literature at the time. See McDougal, 196-213.

artworks indeed appeared modern within the Chinese context, in which “pre-modern” and political art still dominated the cultural field; also, many of those works exhibit an antagonist, subversive attitude towards social and cultural conventions—an attitude that readily fits into the notion of the avant-garde (Gao, 1998, 15-40; Bryson, 51-58). As I will further demonstrate in the following chapters, because of the official art’s consistent dismissal of the “newly introduced western art forms”, a Chinese artist’s conscious employment of those forms does mark his or her contemporaneity (*dangdai xing*).

Despite the controversies, both terms remain widely in use even today. During the 1990s, however, more and more artists and curators began to describe their artworks as “experimental”—a term borrowed from the “Experimental Cinema” (*Shiyan dianying*) in the 1990s—and the term became increasingly “official” the late 1990s. Wu Hong, one of the most prominent scholars in the field, used the term “experimental” to describe the body of works he introduced in a number of major exhibitions he organized in China and the United States. According to Wu, the artists in the 1990s liked to use the term to mark their “independent identity”, to distance themselves from the western-oriented and ahistorical “modern” or “avant-garde”⁴. In July 2005, the Department of Experimental Art (*shiyan yishu xi*) was launched in the Central Academy of Fines Arts at Beijing, formally admitting this art into the curriculum of the most prestigious art institution in China. This shift of terminology, as I will argue more in the following, in fact reflects a more cautious and self-conscious attitude the artists have acquired during their

⁴ Those exhibitions include *Cancelled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* in 2000, *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art, 1990-2000* in 2002 and *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* in 2005. Wu Hong explained his choice of the term “experimental” in great detail in the Introduction to the First Guangzhou Triennial (Wu, 2002, 10-19).

interactions with the contemporary art world. But the new term retains the most important implication of the old ones, namely, the unmistakable though complex affiliation this art has developed with the western modern art. The concept, as Wu Hong acknowledges, comes from Renato Poggioli's well-known statement that the "experimental factor" is crucial to any invention of avant-gardism (Poggioli, 131-37); and sometimes, it refers to none but the "'experimenting' (i.e., imitating) with newly introduced Western art forms." (Wu, 2005, 15) In other words, it is the "imitative" aspect of Chinese contemporary art that endows it with its characteristic "modernity" or "avant-gardism". Wu Hong also argues that an artist becomes experimental through "his/her determination to place him/herself at the *border* of contemporary Chinese society and the art world" (Wu, 2002, 12). Such a determination, however, might be hard to identify in practice, and after all, it does not really signify a break from the modernist or "avant-garde" aesthetics, for which deviation from the mainstream is the norm. Clearly, all the terms discussed above are problematic, although they also possess a consistency that enables them to be compatible in the Chinese context. In order to minimize possible confusions, I will mostly use the term "contemporary" to refer to this body of artworks, but "modern", "avant-garde" and "experimental" will also be used in some occasions—when they appear in quotes, or when the particular contexts demand them.

This type of art, with barely three decades of history, has already grown into a spectacular phenomenon, in both its sheer volume and its global impact. The artists have become regulars in all the international biennales and art fairs since the mid 1990s; their works are now featured in major museums all over the world; and in recent years, the

prices of their works have been going through the roof, attracting a great number of collectors and investors. Comparing with its rapidly growing fame, however, Chinese contemporary art has not received much attention from the academia, in both China and abroad. Most of the researches have been focused on the collecting of data and materials, and the vast majority of books and articles published on the subject were in the form of exhibition catalogues (Erickson, 2002, 109-110). Some of the catalogues, especially the ones edited by prestigious artists and critics such as Wu Hong, Li Xianting, Hou Hanru, Ai Weiwei and Britta Erickson, have explored this art from a variety of perspectives, with remarkable breadth and insights, but they usually cover a great number of artists and works, arranged thematically, with little in-depth analysis devoted to individual artists⁵. Up until 2000, there was only one book—Britta Erickson’s *The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words*— that focuses on a single artist. With the emergence of a handful of high-profiled artists, many more books on contemporary Chinese artists—either in a group or individually—have come out since 2000, many of which were published by the museums, galleries and auction houses. Most of those books, however, are mainly made of images, biographical information and interviews, meant to provide introductions and promotions rather than analytical interpretations.

The lack of analytical scholarship on contemporary Chinese art can be explained by several factors. To this day, experimental art remains marginal in the art world of

5 Many of those catalogues are included in the bibliography of this paper. Wu Hong’s *Reinterpretation*, for example, is a catalogue for the First Guangzhou Triennale, which features nearly 200 artists. Even for exhibitions of much smaller scale, such as *Regeneration* from the Samek Art Gallery, the catalogue features 26 artists. The works in those catalogues are usually organized under thematic titles such as “Memory and Reality”, “Individual and Society” and “City & Countryside”, with no more than one descriptive, caption-like paragraph for each artist.

China and, consequently, is largely absent from the curriculum of most art institutions. Because of the political censorship this art has suffered—and is still suffering, many works and historical documents were lost, and since the artworks themselves often contain a strong political edge, their critics in China often avoid addressing this aspect too explicitly.⁶ In the West, this art is still taken more as a portrayal of the “Chinese identity” than artworks *per se*, attracting many viewers and collectors with its exotic appeal as well as its political antagonism. Even among the most knowledgeable critics, there is a common assumption that this art does not require the same level of sophisticated analysis as its western counterpart does. As Uli Sigg says, the Chinese “have not introduced a new medium into world art”, and “it is certainly not one of the merits of Chinese artists that they have pushed back the frontiers of basic theoretical questions of art”, such as “the last picture” or Abstraction (Fibicher and Frehner, 15). In other words, Chinese art, though having appropriated a great deal from the modern western art, never truly participated in the progressive explorations of its key concepts, and therefore has never contributed anything substantial to the ongoing discourse of modernism.

Interestingly, the contemporary Chinese artists are in fact extremely enthusiastic about the theoretical issues of modernism. As I will argue in the later chapters, their interests in the concepts of modernism tend to precede their actual applications of those concepts in art practices. Theoretical discussions were always a major part of the artistic

⁶ Artworks that memorialize the Tiananmen Square Protest, such as Song Dong’s *Breath* and Yun Minjun’s *Execution*, are among the ones whose references cannot be discussed openly in China. Interesting, due to the very evasiveness and visual images, the artists in fact have more liberty making political commentaries through their works than the writers do.

activities during the 1980s, to a degree that bordered on a “Cultural Fever”. Even today, most of the contemporary Chinese artists are well versed in the latest theories in art, and many have written books and articles on various topics within the “frontiers” of the current art world, although the issues they are engaged in do not always coincide with latest trend of the West. Feminism and Postcolonialism, for example, were among the most discussed theories in the Chinese art world during the 1990s. The former was partially stimulated by the Fourth World Conference on Women, hosted in Beijing in September 1995, and partially by the increasing presence of female artists in the contemporary art scene. The later, on the other hand, was largely a reaction to the artists’ increasing dependence on the Western market at the time, which provided the artists unprecedented opportunities as well as a new set of restrictions. The fact that those artists’ articulation of those theories are entirely overlooked by the “mainstream” art discourses in the West only attests the periphery status Chinese art still possesses—a status that is, after all, shared by many other non-western artists in the multicultural flourish of “world art”.

My dissertation challenges this one-dimensional exchange of cultural discourses. I will explain how contemporary Chinese artists have articulated, expanded and redefined the concepts of originality and appropriation, which are in fact one of the “frontier issues” of contemporary western art. As stated earlier, many artists and critics have acknowledged the particular fascination with “copying” among the Chinese artists, but the subject is largely absent from academic discussions. The art historian Katharine Burnett’s “Through Masters’ Eyes: Copying and Originality in Contemporary Chinese

Landscape Painting” is one of the few scholarly attempts to put the western modern-postmodern discourse on originality and the “traditional” Chinese practice of copying on the same platform, and, therefore, to explore how the contemporary Chinese artists have conceived meaningful and mutually illuminating connections between the West and the East through their art practices. Drawing her materials from the Taiwanese artist Li Mingwei’s project *Through Masters’ Eyes* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May 15-Aug 1, 2004), in which twelve Taiwan and New York-based artists were asked to “copy” the Qing master Shi Tao (1642-1707)’s *Landscape* independently, Burnett compares the dynamic relations between originality and copying in ancient Chinese art traditions with those of western Renaissance and modern art, discusses the concepts of “copying” as understood by the artists participating this project, and points out that the creative diversity of these works has challenged the “postmodernist claims that the idea is everything, the rest is just following a recipe” (Burnett, 323). The critical method of this article, together with Burnett’s extensive research on the idea of originality in pre-Qing Chinese art criticism before the 17th century, has offered the most valuable materials and insights to my own project.

Resources and Methodology

Due to its “underground” status as well as its lack of institutional and technical support, Chinese contemporary art, especially at its early stage, was not documented sufficiently. Many exhibitions were not allowed to open to the public, or were cancelled shortly after their openings; many original works were lost permanently, survived only by

verbal descriptions or low-quality, black and white photo reproductions published by the art journals at the time. This situation improved significantly in the 1990s, but even then, an informally published catalogue was often the only document left after a privately held exhibition. Fortunately, many insiders of the art communities managed to keep a detailed account of events. Gao Minglu and Lü Peng, for example, have written two of the most authoritative histories of this art in the period between 1979 and 1989, *Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi 1985-86* [The History of Contemporary Chinese Art] and *Zhongguo xiandai yishushi, 1979-1989*, [The History of Modern Chinese Art], both published in the early 1990s. Feng Boyi's *The Book with a Black Cover (Heipi shu)*, compiled in 1990 and distributed among the "art circle" at the time, records the artworks and activities that would have been otherwise lost in a period of Post-Tiananmen "cultural hush". A small group of western art historians, John Clark, Hans Vandijk and Britta Erickson in particular, began to do research on contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s, collecting and archiving a great number of interviews, data and bibliographical indexes. Starting from the early 1990s, contemporary Chinese art began to gain exposure in foreign museums and galleries, and the catalogue produced for such exhibitions often contains comprehensive reviews of the art scene in general, with a retrospective summary that covers the entire history of this art to the date of its own publication. All these materials constitute the core resources of my research.

I complement this body of materials with a variety of secondary resources, including art journals and books in both Chinese and English, my own field trips in museums, galleries, studios and the "Art Districts", media coverage, and the internet. Art

journals in the 1980s, especially *Art Monthly (Meishui)* and *World Art (Shijie meishu)*, not only contain the reproductions of many artworks that were not available in any other resources, but also present the most lively and intimate portrayal of the art scene at the time, with numerous announcements and descriptions of art exhibitions and “events”, as well as statements, responses and critical exchanges among the artists. The field trips gave me the most hands-on experiences with this art—experiences that, for an art that grows so rapidly, are at once indispensable and incomplete. My experiences in the “798 Art District” (*798 yishu gongchang*) in Beijing—arguably the center of art activities in China since 2001—in summer 2007 was particularly informative.

Media coverage of contemporary Chinese art, both in China and in the United States, provides me with useful facts, interviews and, most importantly, information on the critical responses to this art from the general public. Lastly, because of the restraints applied by political censorship, the internet was the most convenient access to Chinese contemporary art from an early age on. The *Contemporary Art Online Magazine* (www.Chinese-art.com), for example, was launched by Robert Bernell in 1997, a time when the internet was still unavailable to the majority of Chinese people. For years, it remains the only Western-language periodical devoted to contemporary Chinese art, in which the artists could publish their works and opinions unedited and uncensored. Today, a great variety of websites continue to provide the most up-to-date news about this art, although the information is sometimes unreliable and has to be cross-checked with other resources. In recent years, many artists began to build their own “official” websites and blogs, on which they broadcasted their recent projects, thoughts and experiences in the art

world. Two of the four artists featured in this paper, Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie, have their official websites in both Chinese and English; Zhao Bandi has a blog in Chinese, all of which have proved the most valuable in the studying of their art.

My research also draws from a number of critical theories, especially the ones that deal with the conceptual complexities of originality and its antithesis—copying, reproduction or appropriation. I examine how these concepts are constructed and comprehended in the discourses of Modernism, Postmodernism, Postcolonial theories as well as traditional Chinese literary and art criticisms, explain the connections and discrepancies among all those discourses, while focusing on the conceptual aspects that are manifested in the works of the four artists I choose to discuss in later chapters. When it comes to the interpretation of an individual art work, I combine a thorough review of its contexts with close readings of its visual vocabulary. The former includes the social and cultural background of its production, the critical responses upon its reception, and the institutional framework in which it is conceived and circulated; the latter, illustrated by images, consists more of structural articulation of icons and concepts than formalist analysis.

Both contextual knowledge and visual analysis are crucial to the understanding of contemporary Chinese art; in fact, they are fully integrated with each other. Many critics and artists have observed that, since the 1990s, conceptual art (*guannian yishu*) has become the mainstream in the contemporary art of China.⁷ This *guannian yishu*,

7 This trend is well summarized in Zhu Qi's article "1990s Conceptual Art and Artistic Conceptualization", *Reinterpretation*, 20-27. This "conceptualization" is carried out in nearly every

however, does not refer to the initial movement in Britain and the US during the 1960s, but to a type of art practice at large, spanning from Marcel Duchamp to Damien Hirst. As Alexander Alberro argues in his essay “Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977”:

In the broadest possible definition, then, the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness toward definition of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution (Alberro, 5).

According to this definition, all the four artists under my discussion, Xu Bing, Qiu Zhijie, Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi, may be described as conceptual artists—and they indeed are, by the critics as well as, in some occasions, by themselves. They are clearly aware of the status their works may possess in the narratives of art history and their own positions in the cultural field at large. They are also highly attentive to the context in which their works are displayed and received—they even change or recreate their works to respond to criticisms or to engage with specific groups of viewers. The art institutions in modern China, in particular, play a key role in defining the “publicness and distribution” of this art; and the artists have deliberately exploited, reformed and challenged these institutions through their art practices.

On the other hand, although the artists under my discussion tend to downplay the “cohesiveness and materiality of the art object”, the visual impact of their works is far from irrelevant; in fact, the visual impact of those works is essential for the articulation

media of experimental art, including calligraphy and photography, as the third and fourth chapters of this paper will further demonstrate.

and communication of the “concepts” behind them. The visuality of their works, however, differs from the “purely visual” scheme of conventional pictorial art. It has to be appreciated in specific contexts, and can only be fully revealed through the unfolding of such contexts. My own research intends to reconstruct such contexts from a variety of dimensions, including their personal experiences, the institutional sponsorship they have or seek to have, the critical responses they receive from different audiences, and most importantly, the historical as well as conceptual complexity of the they choose to use. I argue that all the four artists are consciously exploring the potentials of the media of their choice—calligraphy for Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie, and photography for Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi; their visual vocabulary, as I will demonstrate, is built on their individual understanding of their respective media.

Chapter Outline

Based on the extreme importance of contexts in the production and interpretation of Chinese contemporary art, I have devoted a significant portion of my dissertation to lay out the social, historical and theoretical background of this art, and to explain how the concepts of originality and copying are played out in all these conditions. The first two chapters will introduce, respectively, how the practices of “copying”—mostly from the West, but also traditional Chinese art also makes the repertory—evolved during the three decades of modern art in China, and how the concept of originality is developed in different discourses, in China and in the West. The last two chapters focus on the works of the four artists of my choice, with Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie featured in the third chapter,

and Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi in the fourth. In each of the chapters, I start with an investigation of the inner mechanism of media itself and a brief review of how it becomes “modernized” in contemporary Chinese art, then proceed with the interpretation of the individual artists.

My first chapter reviews the short but eventful history of Chinese contemporary art, from its emergence in 1978 to the present day. Like most art history narratives, my review presents individual movements and artists in a cohesive structure, but I will focus more on the evolving network of relations the artists have had with government agencies, art academies, commercial culture, domestic audiences, and foreign art institutions—the social and institutional context of this art, in other words, which was changing constantly at a time when Chinese society was going through the increasingly rapid process of modernization and urbanization. During this process, the Chinese artists have never stopped “copying” from the western art tradition, from its theories and styles to its communal and institutional structures. Their “copying”, however, became increasingly deliberate and nuanced: the artists were clearly recontextualizing and reinterpreting the western tradition in their own social and cultural contexts, to serve their own purposes.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the conceptual complexity of originality and copying, from the relentless self-referentiality of Euro-American modernism, in which the “cult of originality” was established but also challenged, to the prevalence of “techniques of reproduction” in the postmodern era, in which originality is discredited as a concept but in fact merely redefined in the actual evaluation and circulation of art. The “repetition” of modernism in third world art, fraught with tensions between Euro-

centralism and identity politics, offers another dimension to the making of originality. Finally, in traditional Chinese art, the act of copying is often seen as both homage paid to the original piece and an essential part of artistic creativity. All these complexities, as I demonstrate in the second half of my dissertation, are consciously explored by the four artists featured in my research.

The second half focuses on works of two media, calligraphy and photography, both of which contain the paradox between originality and copying in their very nature. The former demands repetitive copying from all practitioners, yet sets individual spontaneity as its ultimate pursuit; it glorifies the power of words in the public life of China, but also nurtures a physical and spiritual intimacy between the artist and his media, rendering the process of copying meditative and exegetic. The latter, a media that subverts the “aura” of originality at the very time of its invention, in fact manipulates and recreates reality while pretending to be mere reproductions of the real. The contemporary photography, on the other hand, appropriates fabricated images and texts into its visual scheme, thus creating a mechanically reproduced world that often looks shockingly unfamiliar, fantastic, and hence original.

Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie's experiments with calligraphy are discussed in the third chapter. Xu's “fake characters”, in both *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* and *Square Characters Calligraphy (Fangkuaizi shufa)*, question the legitimacy of writing and the communicability between cultures. Actively reproducing and recreating the so-called “fake characters” in different contexts, his works have also managed to connect with their site-specific audiences. In both *Copying the Orchid Pavilion for a Thousand Times*

(*Chaoxie lantingjixu yiqian bian*) and *Cenotaph (Jinian bei)*, Qiu's apparently obsessive but deliberately futile copying of previous calligraphy works not only challenges the often authoritative status of those writings, but also returns the act of writing to its very essence—the physical manifestation of one's spiritual state of being.

The fourth chapter deals with the works of Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi. Hong's photographic “reproduction” of the Northern Song masterpiece *Qingming shanghe tu* [Along the River during Qingming Festival] provides an ironic comparison between the modern city of Beijing and its reputed “peace and prosperity” in the ancient times; it also pays homage to the compositional ingenuity of the traditional Chinese painting, while suggests that pictorial realism of photography could be a mere illusion. Zhao Bandi's *Pandaman Series (Zhao Bandi he Xiongmaomi xilie)*, which features digitally staged photographs of himself with a stuffed panda in a variety of real-life and pop culture-oriented situations, plays with a Andy-Warhol cheekiness that, interestingly, enables him to evade both political censorship and public prejudices, and to have a palpable impact on the general public of China. The result is at once ambiguous and provocative.

Chapter I

The “Copying” of Modernism in Contemporary Chinese Art, and the Institutional Shift it Brings

Battle between Realism and Modernism, before 1978

Contemporary Chinese art, like other “contemporary” (*dang dai*) trends in China, started on the “cultural ruin” (*wenhua feixu*) left by the Cultural Revolution, but it would be wrong to assume that the revolution era left a blank state that needs to be filled up. On the contrary, the institutions of art education, production and distribution during the revolution era were functional, prolific and all-powerful. These establishments have created an authoritarian tradition that was, in a sense, analogous to that of the French academy, and this tradition was precisely what the new generation of Chinese “avant-garde” tried to overthrow. Their target, however, is radically different from those of the European modernists, so are the strategies and consequences of their actions.

The so-called “Revolutionary Realism” (*geming xianshi zhuyi*) remained as the dominant style in China for decades. Officially launched by Mao’s speech in the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942 and pushed to a paranoid extreme during the Cultural Revolution, this style combines the Soviet-oriented Social Realism with the “native” folk traditions of China, and aims at “educating the mass” with the ideologue of Communism. The Soviet Social Realism, in turn, originates from the European art traditions, especially from “French and German nineteenth-century academic and realist art” (Laing, 1988, 21), which, far from coincidentally, was also the type of art that was

ardently emulated by the Chinese artists even before the Communist era. Prints and woodcuts, first promoted by Lu Xun (1881-1936) and soon welcomed by all the politically engaged artists in the 1930s, took after contemporary European artists such as Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) and Frans Masereel (1889-1972), as well as a number of Soviet printmakers (Laing, *ibid*, 10-2). This group of prints and woodcuts not only advocate a political agenda by “realistically” portraying the agony of the underprivileged, but are also readily reproducible, making it accessible to a wider audience. Xu Beihong (1895-1953), who always promoted an uncompromising “order of mimesis” in China after receiving rigorous training in the distinguished French National School of Fine Arts in the 1920s, was appointed as the head of the Central Academy of fine arts in Beijing by the Communist party in 1949. Under his directions, mimetic realism soon developed into “an aesthetic canon, institutional power and ideological apparatus in China” (Wang Derwei, 47).

The traditional style of brush painting was still widely practiced during the revolution era, though with a drastically “modernized” appearance. Content wise, contemporary subjects, such as manual labor and battlefield scenes, are routinely depicted. Style wise, this revised mode often displays perspective and compositional techniques adopted from European traditions, while appropriating icons as well as color schemes from Chinese folk art including New Year posters, paper-cuts, and comic-book illustrations. Landscape—the most celebrated genre of traditional brush painting—was also frequently painted, sometimes under party commissions, though the meditative,

reserved tone that was prevalent in the traditional literati painting is now being replaced

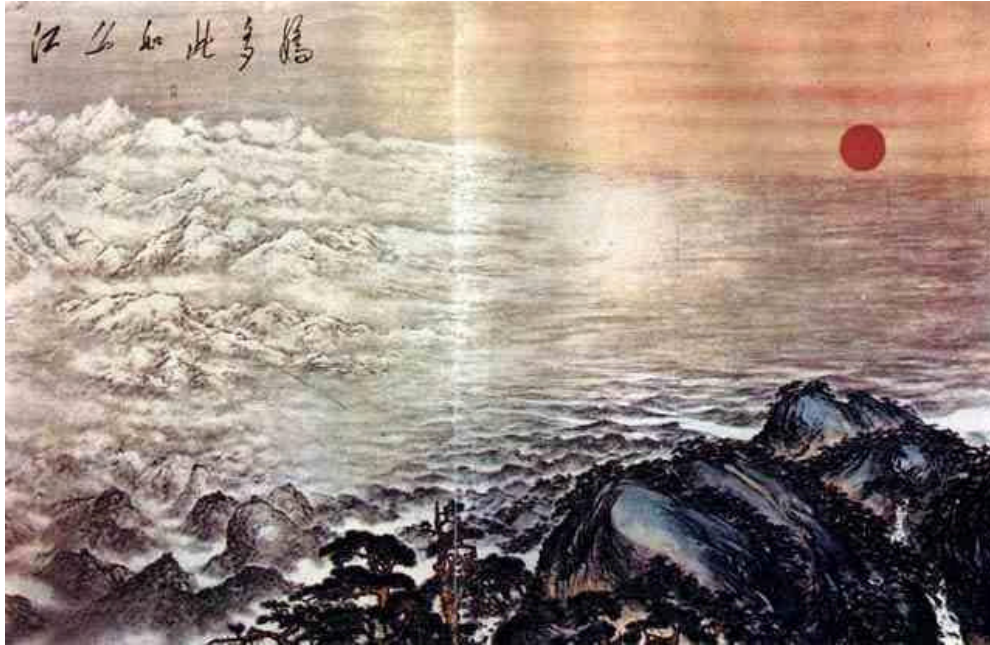


Figure 2 Fu Baoshi, Guan Yueshan, *Jiangshan ruci duo jiao* [Land So Rich in Beauty], 1960. Ink and color on paper, 9m×5.5m.

by patriotic portrayals of magnanimous sceneries. The monumental brush painting *Jiangshan ruci duo jiao* [Land So Rich in Beauty] (Fig. 2), based on a famous poem by Mao Zedong and with inscriptions written by Mao himself, offers a paradigm for this type of “new Chinese paintings” (*xin guohua*). Commissioned for the Tenth Anniversary of the People’s Republic and completed collectively by two prestigious artists, this painting portrays a landscape that is clearly contrived and heavily symbolic, yet may have appeared impressively “real” for the audiences of the age,

While realism, in its various forms, pervaded Chinese art during the revolution era, modernist art was consistently and resolutely rejected. Again, this preference started

before the PRC era. Western modernism was introduced to China as early as the 1910s, followed soon by a group of young artists going to Japan and Europe for their studies.⁸ Some of these artists, like Lin Fengmian, and Zhang Yu, produced works that showed clear influences from modernist masters like Gauguin and Matisse. However, the aesthetics of modernism was overshadowed by that of realism from the very beginning. Xu Beihong accused Matisse and Cezanne as “inferior” and “shallow”, and declared that the formalists in modern art reflected the degeneracy of Western capitalism at large (Sullivan, 72). To him, only realism holds the scientific and observational method that he felt was “the remedy for all the diseases of emptiness and superficiality” of the Chinese tradition (Xu Beihong, 427-35). The defenders of Modernism, on the other hand, tended to adopt a language inherited from the literati art, which was labeled as reactionary to the Chinese intellectuals of the time⁹. Lu Xun, during his studying and translating of Russian Art, also argued that the Cubist and Futurist art of the pre-Stalin era were merely “deconstruction of the old order”, while the realist works afterwards were essential for the reconstruction of a new social order (Sun, 55-6). Such preference was prevalent among the leftist Chinese intellectuals in the 1930s, and was carried further in the

⁸ In 1912, Zhou Zuoren published a series of articles on *Zhengxiang huabao* [Zhengxiang Pictorials] discussing Manet, Whistler and the Impressionists, and in 1917 Lu Qingzhong was introducing the theories of Modernism, including Cubism and Futurism, on *Dongfang zazhi* [The Oriental Magazine]. However, due to the First World War, the Chinese artists could not go to Europe until 1919, and even then, the majority of them went to Japan instead, where, nevertheless, the influence of Modernism was already prevalent. See Sullivan, 35-6.

⁹ One of the prominent defenders of Modernist art was the poet Xu Zhimo, who was a former colleague of Xu Beihong and the editor of the journal *Mei zhan* [Art Exhibition] in the late 1920s. His defense of Cézanne, however, was “squarely couched in idioms from traditional Chinese literati discourse”, in its emphasis on the artist’s “independence of the madding crowd” and commitment to “realize the distinct personal ‘transcendental realm’ (*jingjian*)”. He was defeated in a series of debates with Xu Beihong. See Eugene Y. Wang, 113-4.

Communist doctrines. Indeed, the elite and idiosyncratic aesthetics of Modernism—like that of the classical literati culture—was in direct conflict with the demand of mass propaganda, for which effortless and immediate comprehension is the key. The early interests in modernist art, therefore, was completely abandoned, and gradually forgotten, during the revolution era.

The New Wave, and Embrace of the Modern

Naturally, the young Chinese artists started their rebellion by taking up the hitherto condemned. The street exhibition held by the Star Art Society (*Xingxing huashe*) in September 27, 1979, arguably the first public protest made by the post-revolutionary Chinese artists, showed works with demonstrable influences from Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism and Abstract Art, which were “difficult for the general viewer to understand” at the time (Tang, 5). But the difficulties didn’t prevent the “general viewer” from being thrilled by the Stars—the political criticism those artworks clearly conveyed, as well as the defiant stance the artists took against the authorities, was enough to provoke strong reactions in a society that was used to tight control of expressions. The exhibition was shut down by the police on the next day. The participating artists then organized a protest on October 1, the National Independence day of China, which received media attention in Hong Kong and overseas. The exhibition reopened soon in new locations, and even received permission to be held at the Chinese Art Museum in November—and again the next year. It attracted nearly two hundred thousand visitors in two weeks and quickly became known nationally (Xu Jingxuan, 21-34).

By the end of the same year, a newly-launched journal, *Shijie Meishu* (*World Art*), started publishing a series of essays introducing schools of Modernist art, from Futurism and Dada to Surrealism and Pop Art. The prestigious *Art Monthly* (*Meishu*) also started a series of discussions on modern art, which focused less on artworks *per se* than on the philosophical and ethical issues related with art productions, such as whether an artist is entitled to free expression, or whether “abstract aesthetics” (*chouxiang meixue*) is compatible with Socialist Realism. Such discussions continued for years, despite frequent warnings from the authorities.¹⁰ However, in contrast to the wide-spread enthusiasm devoted to theoretical debates, the works that drew the most critical attention during the early 1980s, such as Luo Zhongli’s *Father* and Chen Danqing’s *Tibetan Series*, were still within the realist tradition, only the subjects of their depiction had become “rustic” and “exotic”, deviating from paradigms of the official realism. Among the large number of western artists introduced in the period, the ones who enjoyed the largest group of admirers in the same period were Andrew Wyeth and Gustave Klimt, neither could be identified as “modern”. (Tang, 7-10)

The first flourish of domestic modern art came in 1985, when the “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign” (*fan jingshen wuran yundong*) finally came to an end. It was marked by the “Progressive Chinese Youth” (*Qianjing zhong de zhongguo qingnian*) exhibition at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. The participants were mostly

¹⁰ Qu Leilei published his article “Ziwo biao xian de yishu” [The Art of Self-Expression] on March 1980, followed by two years of debates on the function of art. Wu Guanzhong first proposed his “Abstract Aesthetic” on May 1980, launching the debates between subject and form, realism and abstraction. Those articles were condemned by the government during the “Anti-Spiritual Pollution” campaign in 1983.

students from established art institutions, and their works displayed more technical virtuosity—and less political antagonism—than those of the *Xingxing* members. By the end of the year, an exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg was held in the same museum, and for the Chinese artists, most of whom had only experienced modern art through low-quality reproductions, it was inspirational. The “New Wave” (*Xinchao*) movement was soon in full swing. In a manner that resembled the modernist movements in Europe at the beginning of 20th century, art societies sprouted rapidly nationwide—eighty-seven in two years—each delivering its own manifesto, publishing its own criticisms, putting up its own exhibitions and fiercely debating with each other. Most of these societies actively associated themselves with certain schools of western modernism: the “North Art Camp” (*Beifang qunti*) was under the influence of Surrealism; the “Art Group of Southwestern China” (*Xinan yishu qunti*), advocating anti-urban regionalism, was affiliated with Expressionism; the “Xiamen Dada” group, apparently, inherited its postmodern and anti-art attitude from the European Dada.

The above three groups constituted the most prominent art societies during the New Wave, but there were a much wider range of modern art present at the time. From 1985 to 1989, modernist theories and art works of all varieties poured in, and were put into practice immediately, while little attention was paid to the “chronology and internal logic” of the contexts of their origins (Wu, *Reinterpretation*, 13). As one can see clearly from the phenomenal “China/Avant-garde Exhibition” (*Zhongguo/Xianfeng yishu zhan*), almost every school of twentieth-century western art had its followers in China. Held in the National Art Gallery in Beijing on February 5, 1989, this exhibition displayed 293

pieces of artworks from 186 artists, from painting and sculpture to video, installation and multimedia, from Abstraction and Pop to Performance and Conceptual Art, most of which could not possibly be found in China a decade ago. As acknowledged by critics and artists alike, the overwhelming impact western modernism had on Chinese contemporary art during the eighties was “a clear fact” (Strassberg, 15).

On the other hand, while embracing Modernism, many of the artists in *Xinchao* also attempted to infuse their works with elements of Chinese origin, from their choices in iconography and media to their stylistic preferences and aesthetic pursuits. And again, they tended to revoke the part of tradition that was suppressed and condemned during the revolutionary era. This selective “syntheticism” was already obvious in the 1985 exhibition, in which a work entitled *Enlightenment of Adam and Eve in the New Age* (*Zai xin shidai—yadang he xiwa de qishi*), with a yin-yang diagram, two Chinese-style doors and a carved image of the Buddha side by side with the naked Biblical couple, drew the most attention from the critics and viewers alike. Another prominent exhibition in 1987 featured Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong, who, respectively, took up the traditional media of calligraphy and paper-cut to express “distinctly modern sensibilities” (Tang, 14): Xu’s “fake characters”—as I will discuss more later—draws from the theory of semiotics and questions the legitimacy of languages, while Lü’s “little red people” turns the homespun art of paper-cutting into surreal and abstract sculptural figures. The practitioners of Abstract Art found their inspiration from Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) as much as from the quintessentially Chinese art of calligraphy and literati paintings, both of which are used to place personal expression and aesthetic

transcendentalism over mimesis. Huang Yongping, the leading figure in the Xiamen Dada group, announced in his manifesto “Dada—A Type of Postmodern?” (*Dada, yizhong houxiandai?*) that Dada and Postmodernism, with their anti-art, anti-culture attitude, was a modern version of Zen Buddhism, and that his own art would combine the principles of all the three¹¹.

Some of the analogies drawn between the eastern and western traditions, as formulated by the *Xinchao* artists, may seem far-reaching or even naïve today, but those artists sincerely believed in the fundamental communicability between the two cultures, as well as “the possibility of applying modern Western aesthetics and philosophy as a means of revitalizing Chinese culture” (Li Xianting, 5-22). Clearly, the “avant-garde” status the New Wave artists assigned to themselves implied not only their stance as political dissents, but also a much grander role—as the “forerunners” who could lead the general public to a more modernized China. Their enthusiastic imitation of western styles was an essential part of the “Cultural Fever” (*wenhuare*) from 1985 to 1989—a nationwide turmoil of debates, seminars, speeches and publications, encompassing philosophy, history, social sciences, literature and art and reaching a large part of the population, “from big-name professors to high school students, from government officials to interested workers and soldiers”. The feverish character of the movement, as Zhang Xudong pointed out, came from “the collision and conflation of two contemporary but historically differentiated cultural worlds”—the newly “imported” western culture and the “updated” traditional Chinese culture—and “fueled by the diffusion of their concerns

¹¹ The article was originally published on *Zhongguo meishu bao* (*Fine Arts in China*) on September, 1986.

among the educated public” (Zhang, 35). After decades of cultural uniformity and isolation, the intellectuals of China were eager to again “catch up” with the freer, more industrialized societies. Like their May Fourth precedents, the intellectuals in the 1980s also believed that a cultural reform should pave the way for the social progress at large. What they pursued was a politically disengaged—hence the emphasis on “culture”—yet ideologically motivated culture, which may redefine their own status in society, and bring the “mass” of China to a new level of Enlightenment.

The New Wave artists, who kept close society with intellectuals in other cultural fields, shared a similar yearning for a “Enlightenment” in art, led by themselves and followed by the general public. Their works advocated individualism, rationalism, and the autonomy of art, all of which conform well to the pronounced ideals of western modernity. Their attempt to infuse both Western and Chinese visual traditions in their artworks, on the other hand, reveals their deep belief in a universal, transcendental humanity, as well as their desire to construct a new and modern Chinese culture, a culture that combines the best from both the East and the West but remains accessible to all—again, an ideal their May Fourth predecessors aspired to but failed to achieve. The New Wave experiments, nevertheless, did not produce a harmony between the East and the West. In fact, the works that infused the elements from the two cultures into one pictorial frame often revealed their incompatibility, and the “mass appeal” this art created proved to be short-lived, even misleading.

Chinese Contemporary Art after 1989: Local and Global

The exhilarated mood in the first “China/Avant-Garde Exhibition” did not last long. Less than four months later, the Tiananmen Square Protests took place, turning the Romance of modernity into bloodshed. The practice and exhibition of modern art, however, were halted only briefly¹², and resumed with a flourish that far exceeded the New Wave in their global scale. The art scene in the 1990s was palpably different—in the styles and concepts of artworks, but more importantly, in the positioning and self-positioning of the artists, as well as in the process of art production, distribution and consumption.

The year 1989 can be seen as the turning point in the history of contemporary Chinese art. Firstly, the disastrous turnout of the Tiananmen Square Protests has profoundly shaken the mental state and social status of modern Chinese intellectuals, of which the artists always saw themselves as a part. The protest, started with heroic idealism, led to the death of thousands of civilians and students, disciplinary “reeducation” of more, and a hushed fear many years afterwards. Disillusion and cynicism prevailed; the ideas of democracy, individual freedom and spiritual Enlightenment were no longer “feverishly” pursued by the majority of educated Chinese. Consequently, the notion that the artist can—and shall—become the prophet and leader—or, in another word, the “avant-garde”—in a larger culture was no longer an automatic assumption. The pursuit of “modernity” in art, as defined in the 1980s, has also become a

¹² Avant-garde art was criticized as a typical form of “bourgeois liberalism” (*zichan jieji ziyou zhuyi*) after 1989. *Fine Arts in China* was closed on January 1980. *Art Monthly*, the center of the New Wave, also went through radical personnel changes in the September. For two years, there were virtually no public exhibitions of contemporary art in China, although small scale exhibitions were still held in the art academies, such as *The World of Women Painters (nu huajia de shijie)* exhibition in May 1990, held in the Central Academy of Fine Arts and featuring eight “new generation” (*xinsheng dai*) female artists.

problematic mission; postmodernism, with its criticism to the modern ideas, gradually became more dominant in the cultural field. As stated earlier, postmodernism (*houxiandai*) was introduced into China in the 1980s. However, it was not until in the early 1990s did it become a center of cultural debates, as well as a critical approach with which the intellectuals reflected on the inherent problems of modernity¹³.

The era of postmodernism, however, was prompted less by cultural reflections than by social and economical changes at large. Launched by Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour (*nanxun*) in the spring of 1992, during which he restated the "Reform and Open" policies and initiated the Pudong New Area in Shanghai, China entered a period of continuous high growth, and started to merge into the global market at an unprecedented scale. A more wide-spread and "up-to-date" scene of modernity emerged, with all its glories as well as agonies. The overwhelming dominance of popular culture in the 1990s was among the phenomena brought by this new level of globalization; in comparison with the instant appeal of this culture, both the official propaganda and the elite-literati tradition began to seem powerless. The "avant-garde" art, with no institutional support, was at an even more decisive disadvantage when competing with the popular visual culture. With more visual entertainment available, the enthusiasm and controversy the

¹³ Fredric Jameson gave a series of lectures in Beijing University in 1985, which offered the most comprehensive summary of postmodern theories in the 1980s. But it's not until the early 1990s did a number of Chinese scholars begin to engage in the discussion of postmodernism in their own writings, among which are Wang Yunchuan's *Houxiandai zhuyi wenhua yanjiu* [*Studies of Postmodernist Culture*, 1992], Zhang Yiwu's *Zai bianyuanchu zhuisuo* [*Explore at the Margins*, 1992], Wang Ning's *Duoyuan bingsheng de shidai* [*The Age of Multiple Dimensions*, 1994] and Zhao Zumo's *Zhongguo houxiandai wenxuan congshu* [*The Collection of Chinese Postmodern Literature*, 4 volumes, 1994]. "Postmodern" became a catchphrase in the academia around the mid 1990s. Most of those books, together with the equally prominent works of postcolonial theories, focused on the criticism of modernity and the "Enlightenment complex".

New Wave artists sometimes provoked among the general public was no longer seen during the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the popular culture, with its rich visual content, has also offered the artists new opportunities for experimentations. In the 1980s, despite the influence Rauschenberg and Warhol had on the Chinese artists and some imitation of their works, "no one--including artists and critics--really understood the meaning of Pop art." (Yi, xlv.) Ellen Johnson Laing, in her article "Is there Post-Modern Art in the People's Republic of China?", also argues that postmodern art does not exist in China, because of the political constraints, the lack of a sufficiently "modern" art history, and the absence of "a healthy, truly 'grass-roots' popular culture" to serve as "a major reservoir of motifs" for the artists (Laing, 1991, 210). While the first two of her arguments remain partially valid to this day, the last one became patently false only a few years later. As the products of popular visual culture—"images, logs, techniques and texts from television, videos, films, advertisements, packaging, comic strips, cartoons", in Laing's words—flood the everyday reality of China, more and more artists have begun to draw liberally from the visual vocabulary of the popular. Political Pop (*Zhengzhi bopu*), first known to the public in the 1992 Guangzhou Biennial, was celebrated as the most important contemporary style in painting in the ground-breaking exhibition *China's New Art: Post-1989* (Hanark T Z Gallery, Hong Kong 1993). It was promptly joined by the equally famed Cynical Realism (*popi yishu*, literally means "Rogue Art"), produced by a younger generation of artists who conveyed "irreverence and malaise" in their works (Zhang Songren, III). Next came Gaudy Art (*yansu yishu*), with even more blatantly vulgar

subject matters that, in the words of the artists themselves, reflected the consumerist fantasy of the lower class and the peasants. Those paintings, true to their names, are often disturbingly campy and gruesome, with glossy and over-saturated pictorial surface, as well as images of nudity, violence or disease juxtaposed with revolutionary and commercial icons. They are often criticized as being kitsch and tasteless like the commercial culture itself, which was of course their very intension: in a way similar to the emergence of Pop Art in Britain and The United States in the 1950s, the flourish of popular culture in China prompted contemporary art towards a period of postmodern collage and parody.

The success of Political Pop, Cynical Realism and the Gaudy Art, however, can never be fully explained without the third, and perhaps the most important, factor that redirected contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s: having obtained significant exposure and recognition internationally since 1989, this art has grown increasingly “export-oriented”. Starting with the 1991 *China Demain Pourherr (Zhongguo mingtian)* in Pourrières, France, exhibitions featuring contemporary Chinese art sprouted up in Europe, Japan, Hong Kong and the United States¹⁴. After the Venice Biennial in 1993, at which thirteen Chinese artists, together with the independent curator Li Xianting, were invited to organize an “Oriental Route” group project, Chinese artists have become “regulars” at most international Biennials and art fairs. By 1995, the avant-garde artists

¹⁴*I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne* (California, USA, 1991), *Exceptional Passage: Chinese Avant-Garde Artists Exhibition* (Fukuoka, Japan, 1991), *Encountering the Others: The Kassel International Art Exhibition* (Germany, 1992), *Silent Energy* (Oxford, England, 1993), *Chinese New Art: Post-1989* (Hong Kong; Sydney, Australia, 1993) and *Framgmented Memories: Chinese Avant-Garde Artists in Exile* (Ohio, USA, 1993) were the most prominent examples.

“have developed high profile in international art circles” while being “virtually ignored at home” (Gao, 2005, 378). Both the Tiananmen Protest and the “free global market” contributed greatly to this drastic shift of audiences. The former, having received intensive media coverage all over the world, helped the Chinese artists to establish themselves as political exiles from the only large Communist region left in the post-Cold-War era. The “free world” paid them homage accordingly, as the titles of many early overseas exhibitions of Chinese art, such as *Chinese New Art: Post-1989* and *Chinese Avant-Garde Artists in Exile*, readily proved. The latter, on the other hand, has enabled the artists to be fully engaged with the global art market—to obtain the most up-to-date information, to travel abroad often, to experience the latest trend in art, and, eventually, to earn their own reputation as well as financial rewards through interacting with foreign curators, critics, dealers and collectors, in person or through agents. At last, the Chinese artists were able to sever themselves from the art academies and government agencies, which used to be their sole provider of financial supports. The Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and the East Village, both located at the deserted suburbs of Beijing, flourished in the early 1990s, in which experimental artists from all over the country formed a close community of their own, leading a life as independent, “bohemian” and intensely creative as their Euro-American counterparts do.

Joining the global art world provided the experimental artists with freedom and opportunities they never had before, politically, economically and artistically, but the freedom also came with a price. Now the artists have to face an international—though in

fact still Euro-centric—market, in which the rules are subtle and the competition is fierce.

In order to have a competitive edge, the artists often had to play “the Chinese cards”,

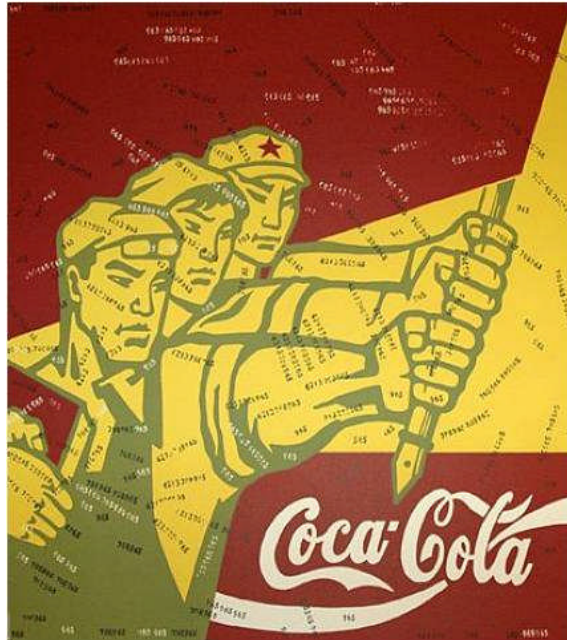


Figure 3 Wang Guangyi, *New Coca-Cola*, 2002. 34 × 30 inches, lithography.

which means flouting “exotic” yet easily recognizable “Chinese icons”, from *tai-ji* and *fengshui* to the giant panda and Chairman Mao. As Britta Erickson points out, three issues always dominate the western perceptions of experimental Chinese art: the “colonialist search for exoticism in ‘the other’”, the Tiananmen event, and the tendency to see it as mere derivative from western modern art (Erickson, 2002, 105-6). That is to say, in order to gain a position in the Euro-American dominated art world, the Chinese artists need to produce works that are exotically “Chinese”, yield easily to political interpretations, and appear adequately but modestly “modern”. Political Pop and Cynical

Realism meet such expectations perfectly. The former, represented by the works of Wang Guangyi, juxtaposes universally recognized pop icons, such as the logos of Coca-cola and



Figure 4 Fang Lijun, *Series 2: No. 2*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 200 x 200cm

BMW or images of seductive women, with equally familiar political icons such as the Red Guards, factory workers and, above all, Mao, in a style that apparently resembles the American Pop and the Soviet SOTS Art.¹⁵ (Fig. 3) The latter, exemplified by the works of Fang Lijun, portrays ordinary Chinese folks with the stereotypical “oriental roguish” facial expressions, in surrealist and claustrophobic settings that suggest desolation, boredom and, according to the mainstream western media, a contained urge to rebel and a

15 The influence of Andy Warhol on Political Pop artists was apparent and acknowledged by Wang Guangyi himself. Its association with the Soviet SOTS Art, represented by Alexander Kosolapov’s 1980 project *Lenin Coca-cola*, was also “inevitably invoked” when it was first exhibited, in the *China’s New Art, Post-1989* exhibition held in Hong Kong in 1993. See Yi Ying, 30-31; Gao Minglu “*Meisu, quanli, gongfan, zhengzhi bopu xianxiang*” [Kitsch, Power, Conspiracy: The Political Pop Phenomena]. August 14, 2007 <http://person.artron.net/show_news.php?newid=32705>

yearning for vaster space.¹⁶ (Fig. 4) Another type of Chinese art that made its name in the international scene in the early 1990s was the traditional-folk art group, such as the aforementioned Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong, as well as Cai Guoqiang, whose visual inventory included *fengshui*, Chinese medicine, dragon and gunpowder, and Gu Wenda, who experimented on ink-wash paintings and antiquated scripts. It seems that, as long as international reputation remains as the hallmark of success for individual artists in China, the strategy of playing the “Chinese card” with a twist of modernist techniques is likely to keep its hold.



Figure 5 Zhang Dali, *Demolition Forbidden City*, 1998. Photograph.

16 See Solomon, Andrew “Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China”. *The New York Times Magazine* 19 December 1993. Fang Lijun’s *The First Group*, No. 3 was featured on the cover of this issue.

Not surprisingly, this strategy has also incurred heavy criticism, in and out of the “art circle” in China. The artists themselves, struggling in the West-dominated market, also resented the marginalized and preconceived role to which they have been relegated. Not surprisingly, it was not long before both the critics and artists began to call for an art that might, once again, connect with the native contexts and catch the attention of the domestic audience. According to Wu Hung, a “domestic turn” started in the field of experimental art almost simultaneously with the opening of the international art scene, first among the young artists who had not yet earned their international fame, then became the stated mission of the majority (Wu, 2005, 24-25). More and more experimental artists were choosing subject matters more relevant to the contemporary Chinese society, especially the social, ethical and personal issues that emerged in the accelerating process of modernization and urbanization, such as forced immigration, social violence, and deconstruction of local communities (Fig. 5). They were also producing more and more works in unconventional and non-collectible media including video, multi-media, installation and performance; their art, consequently, was growing more site-specific and communal.

Those changes, however, were not necessarily as domestically-oriented as Wu Hung argues. In fact, they were certainly influenced by the postmodern, multi-cultural approach of the contemporary art world—and, in many occasions, were meant to meet the expectations of this world. This approach, having become powerful since the 1980s, encourages social and cultural critiques from the underprivileged and “ethnic” groups: it

advocates an interactive, “relational”, anti-establishment aesthetics, innovative use of media as well as the employment of the latest technologies. Apparently, the works produced in the “domestic turn” movement fit the above criterion well. The continuing dominance of this “multiculturalism” in contemporary Chinese art can be observed in the agenda of upcoming 2008 Guangzhou Triennial *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*. Its “Theme Statement” says that the revolutionary concept of multiculturalism has been “transformed to leading discourses safely guarded by ‘political correctness.’” The Triennial calls for an art that is “not cosmopolitanism; not multi-culturalism, not tribalism; not post-colonialism; not identity politics; not sociological report; not relational aesthetics; not regime of the Other; not alternative modernity; not hybridity; not showcase of new stars; not metropolis of art.”¹⁷—a heroic mission that is, admittedly, hard to achieve. In other words, instead of imitating the past schools of Euro-American Modernism with little regard to its “chronology and inner logic”, now the Chinese artists are using their irreducible locality to gain admission to the truly contemporary and global club—the international art world that still largely depends on the institutions and rules of the “self-correcting west”.

Toward a Modern Institution: the Western Paradigm and the Chinese Alternatives

The “export-oriented” and the “domestic-oriented” trends in Chinese art, with their nominally antagonistic but often converging characteristics, have together initiated a

¹⁷ See Press Release for the Third Guangzhou Triennial, Sept. 10 2007 <
<http://www.gdmoa.org/zhanlan/threeyear/4/5/11149.jsp>>. The exhibition is scheduled to open from
September 11 to November 16

reform that probably will exceed all else in its long-term impact—a reform of the art institutions in China, or, in the words of many critics and curators, the “normalization and systematization of independent art practice” (Wu, 2000, 17).

In traditional Chinese culture, most artists claimed to work for small and elite audiences. The court painters, whose existence was recorded as early as the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), usually worked under official commissions, while the literati (*wenren* or *shiren*) artists, whose aesthetic ideals gradually became dominant since the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), tended to make art on their own, ostensibly with no intention to make a profit. In both cases, the most respected forms of “fine arts”—calligraphy and ink-brush painting—were meant for private viewing only, partly due to their relatively small scales and fragility.¹⁸ The revolutionary era reversed the model of art production and consumption, making it highly collective and public. The New Wave artists, while claiming an aesthetics as high-minded as that of the literati, still clung to the same collective, official mode of art production and distribution, and aimed at a heroic —no matter brief—“takeover” of the cultural field. The 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition was an example of such attitude: held at the National Art Gallery, it was organized in the same manner as an official exhibition and, because of a performance that involved a gunshot, was shut down after the first day. The “power-taking” (*duoquan*) and “mass

18 Commercial-oriented and mass-appealing art, of course, always existed in China. However, given the fact that frescoes, carvings, sculptures and architectures, as well as the variety of “crafts”, were not considered as “fine arts” in pre-modern China, and often bears no names of their individual creators, it is fair to argue that the statues of “public art” in the Chinese tradition differs significantly from those in the European tradition. This situation, however, was beginning to change in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), when the highly developed techniques of wood-block printing made the reproduction of paintings accessible to the general public. See Clunas, 134-148.

movement” (*yundong*) mentality the artists inherited from the revolution era may help to explain their strategic choice, but more importantly, being largely isolated from the international art market, switching to an alternative model was simply unthought-of and unthinkable at the time.

Not surprisingly, the contacts with foreign curators and dealers in the early 1990s quickly introduced the artists to the “standard circulation system” of modern art, with its gallery/museum-auction house-Biennale/art fair triangle of consumption and its artist-dealer-critic-collector-academics chain of production. In a few years, a small group of “independent curators” (*duli cezhanren*) emerged. These curators are not officially associated with any museums or art academies, and most of them work as artists and critics at the same time; many of them started this line of work when collaborating with foreign curators, and, with experiences earned in the process, they proceeded on their own, introducing their own art as well as those of their colleagues and friends to a larger audience. Fei Dawei, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu and Zhang Songren were among the earliest and the most influential independent curators in China, all of whom mastered at least one foreign language, and started their career organizing exhibitions overseas.¹⁹ They were quickly followed by another group of more domestic-oriented yet equally cosmopolitan curators, such as Ai Weiwei and Qiu Zhijie, who started their careers as artists and later learned curatorship from their exhibition experiences.

¹⁹ Fei Dawei, who went to France as an art historian and visiting scholar in the late 1980s, was the curator of *China Demain Pourherr*, the first oversea exhibition of contemporary art. Li Xianting, Gao Minglu and Zhang Songren organized, respectively, *Mao Goes Pop* (Sydney, Australia), *Chinese New Art: Post-1989* (Hong Kong; Sydney, Australia) and *Fragmented Memories: Chinese Avant-Garde Artists in Exile* (Ohio, USA) in 1993.

The “independent” curators, however, soon realized that a modernized and self-sufficient domestic system, with cultural as well as economic potentials, was of paramount importance for the sustainable growth of experimental art, and naturally, they tried to build this system after the western models. The Guangzhou Biennale in 1992, sponsored by private companies, hosted in a five-star hotel and offering cash prizes of an “unheard-of amount”(US \$120,000), was among the first major initiatives taken towards this goal. The event did not go as well as planned, but more Biennales and Triennales were later held in Guangzhou and Shanghai, in larger scale and with more success²⁰. Commercial galleries began to appear in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou around the same time, most of which were still financed by foreign investors and targeted at foreign buyers, but they also held public and educational exhibitions. The first of such galleries, the Red Gate (opened 1991), has been sponsoring non-Beijing artists with two-months of working studio and free lodging since 2001. The Wan Fung Gallery, opened in 1993, held a non-profit exhibition *The Era of Factory No. 2* in 2000, curated by students from the Art History Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Non-profit and private-owned galleries appeared a few years later, mostly in smaller cities such as Chengdu, Tianjin and Shenyang, and they remain a small minority to this day, but, freed from market demands, they may serve as the exhibition space for the more controversial and cutting-edge works of art. The Upriver Gallery in Chengdu, for example, organized a number of “invitation-only” exhibitions in 1999 and 2000, including *Xueshu yaoqing*

20 Those include the 1996 “*Open Space*” *Shanghai Biennale*, the 1998 “*Mergence and Development*” *Shanghai Biennale*, the 2000 “*Shanghai Spirit: A Special Modernity*” *Shanghai Biennale*, the *Urban Creation-2002 Shanghai Biennale*, and the 2002 *First Guangzhou Triennial of Contemporary Art*.

zhan [The Academy Invitation-Only Exhibition], *Zhuanshi shidai* [Age of Revival] and *Shehui* [Society]. The first domestic auction of experimental artworks *Reality: Present and Future* was held in 1998, at the Beijing International Art Palace inside of the Holiday Inn Crown Plaza Hotel, sponsored by the Sungari International Auction Co. Ltd. The next year, another auction, entitled *A Chinese Dream*, was hosted by the prestigious Yanhuang Museum at Beijing. Both auctions had official permits and open to the public. The basic infrastructure of modern art institutions, it seems, was constructed in China within a few years.

While the imitation of Euro-American modernist styles and concepts was much criticized in the 1990s, the “copying” of western art institutions stirred little controversy among the art circle during the same period, partly due to the simple fact that, for an extended period of time, such institutions were the only venues through which contemporary art could be exhibited in China. However, to merge into the “standard circulation system” has proved much more difficult than expected, if not entirely impossible, in practice. First, government censorship still exerts much pressure and restraint on experimental art during the 1990s, preventing the marketing system from functioning smoothly. All public exhibitions had to first obtain sponsorship from licensed institutions, then to apply for approval from authorities, who, with no specific laws to rely upon, may make or revoke their decisions arbitrarily. Generally speaking, artworks with explicit political, sexual or violent contents will not pass censorship, but with many loopholes in the system—such as pure negligence of the officials or “special relations” the curators established with the ones in charge— they might still receive permissions.

However, if they start attracting too much attention, the permissions might be canceled again. Ten exhibitions were canceled in Beijing alone from 1997 to 1999, including the ambitious *The First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art 96-7*, organized through legal procedures by the Capital Normal University. Naturally, a much greater number of artists with sensitive materials used “self-inspection” and decided not to apply for official permissions at all (Wu, 2000, 149). Secondly, the public platform that supports a healthy and sustainable growth of independent art institutions in the west, such as government funding, individual philanthropy and effective regulations on copyrights as well as on art business itself, still did not exist in China. The 1992 Guangzhou Biennale, for example, ended in two years of legal disputes, and the organizers did not even manage to pay off the cash rewards they promised to the contestants (Lü and Yi, 124-33). The situation has improved much since then, but even today, with neither tax incentives nor a philanthropic tradition, art establishments can get little private funding without offering advertisement opportunities to the sponsors for return. Lastly, the domestic market for contemporary art remained extremely limited. A wealthy and art-collecting class did not emerge in China until the late 1990s, and the majority of them are much more willing to buy works that “bear the clear imprint of the traditional culture”, with “the presence of explicit markers and a fairly repetitive formal topography” (Fibicher and Frehner, 37). Contemporary art clearly does not belong to this category.

The “normalization and systematization” of contemporary art, therefore, must take an alternative path in China. Since the early 90's, the “form, timing, location and function” of domestic exhibitions has become a “dominating issue” in the art world and a

field for experimentation itself (Wu, 2000, 21). Among the twelve exhibitions recorded in Wu Hong's *Cancelled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, four were designed to be conventional exhibitions—located in museums and galleries, with official permissions, all of which were canceled before their scheduled openings. Among others, five were semi-closed and private, held in basements (*Persistent Deviation/Corruptionists*, November 7-8, 1998; *Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion*, Beijing, January 9-10, 1999), art studios (*Traces of Existence: A Private Showing of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Beijing, January 2, 1998; *Infatuated with Injury: Open Studio Exhibition No. 2*, Beijing, April 22, 2000) and underground bars (*Food as Art*, Beijing, February 17, 2000); two were designed as a part of, respectively, a shopping mall (*Supermarket*, Shanghai, April 10-13, 1999) and a furniture store (*Home? Contemporary Art Proposals*, Shanghai, April 8-12, 2000); the most experimental one, *Wildlife (jingzhe)*, was produced and recorded through an entire year (March 5, 1997 to March 5, 1998), performed site-specifically in seven cities, with no real exhibition space to speak of. Some works from this exhibition, such as Zhuang Huan's *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond* (1997, performance, Beijing), later became highly-esteemed and reentered regular exhibition spaces as photographs.

Admittedly, the adventures of the above exhibitions in the “nonexhibition spaces” (*feizhanlan kongjian*) were not entirely “original”: they have drawn inspiration from the postmodern attacks on art establishments, which started in the West during the 1960s.²¹

²¹ Song Dong, the curator of *Wildlife*, made this distinction while acknowledge the western influence on the experimental exhibitions of China. See Song's interview with Wu Hong in February 2000 (Wu, 2000, 144-7)

However, while the western artists and critics tried to rebel against the well-established and all-powerful museum system, many Chinese curators aimed to find an “alternative path” to show the works that may otherwise remain unknowable. Their practices, therefore, turned out to be very different from the western precedents, despite their similarities in theory. The paramount concern of the western curators—fund-raising and PR—was not much of an issue for the independent curators in China, who funded most of their shows with their own savings as well as with contributions from participating artists, and spent much of their time trying to keep publicity within intended circles or to realize certain goals that are not related to art.²² Both conditions may seem very unpleasant for the curators—as Qiu Zhijie puts it, “every show of experimental art in China is a compromise and never thorough” (Wu Hong, 2001, 115)—but they also played a key role in forming the unique features of such domestic exhibitions, and, consequently, modify the nature of the artworks themselves.

From the twelve cases described above, one can observe two exhibition modes emerging—the “private-oriented” ones and the “public-oriented” ones, each formed by its respective set of restricted conditions.²³ The former, usually of small scale and open

²² The private exhibitions tended to be self-funded and PR-free. *Post-Sense Sensibility*, for example, had each participating artist contribute 1,000 yuan (about US \$ 120) and one organizer donating 20,000 yuan (about US \$2,250), for rental expenses and printing of the catalogue (Qiu, 63-70). The public ones, with a bigger budget, had a harder time with fund-raising, and had to conform to the demands of their sponsors. *Supermarket*, in their “Information for Sponsors”, promised to use “invitation mailings, posters, radio advertising and preopening press release” to attract more clients to the mall, and emphasized the fact that the sponsorship was “part of the subject itself” (Wu, 2000, 174).

²³ Qiu Zhijie first proposed “two extremes” within the exhibition system in a roundtable discussion as early as 2000: one is directed at the public, the other at “people within the art world”. See Wu Hung, 2001, 122-23. These two modes were then formally used by Wu Hong to describe experimental exhibitions in both *Cancelled* and *Reinterpretations*, though he did not lay out the characteristics of each in details.

only for insiders, tend to be intimate, interactive and radically innovative. The organizer will obtain a small exhibition space, free or with little expenses; the artists and curators will install the works themselves, doing all the manual labor involved. The largest item on the expense list was the compiling and printing of a catalogue, the cost of which seldom exceeds a few hundred US dollars. The curators of *Persistent Deviation*, for example, borrowed the basement from a friend, did the designing of space and installation of artworks collaboratively, and spent all the funding—28,000 yuan (US \$3,300) on the catalogue (Wu Hong, 2000, 156-8). The guests received invitations individually through mail or over the phone, and learned the exact time and location only one day or even several hours before the opening. The plans of those exhibitions are seldom definite, and many unexpected events may take place at the eve of their openings, such as the removal or addition of artworks or change of themes. In the case of *Persistent Deviation*, as the basement for exhibition was originally rented to a rock band, the musicians simply “made [their] practice session a public event” during the exhibition (ibid. 159). With no need to put on a “public appearance”, these shows may venture into the most daring fields, but, when they went to real extremes, like in the case of the *Post-Sense Sensibility*, in which the corpses of animals and humans were used in artworks, they may attract wider attentions, or even turn into a media phenomenon afterwards. The shows themselves typically lasted only one or two days; sometimes they had to close ahead of schedule, when it was suspected that government officials might intervene. The works were quickly removed and, sometimes, destroyed by the end of the show; some were kept in the catalogues only, in forms of photographs and textual descriptions.

The “public-oriented” ones, on the other hand, aimed to reach a much broader audience and, eventually, to “popularize” experimental art in China. Some of them were held in official museums and galleries, but, due to a high possibility of cancellation and poor attendance rates in those venues, many independent curators chose to hold their exhibitions in tourist sites, streets, neighborhoods, and, above all, commercial spaces. *Supermarket* and *Home*, both held in the ultra-commercialized Shanghai, were among the most interesting cases in this category. In order to get funding, both provided advertising opportunities to potential sponsors, and integrated such opportunities with the very subject matters of the artworks. The former was organized as a real supermarket, with “mass-produced” objects displayed on the shelf as regular merchandize. The artist Song Dong even stood outside of the mall, playing the role of a tour guide for an “art travel agency” and broadcasting the exhibition through a loudspeaker. The exhibition poked fun at the consumer culture, which “has become the predominant religion in Shanghai”, but, by “operating the way commerce operates” (ibid. 174), it also suggested the commercial aspect of contemporary art itself. The later was organized as a “theme-show” in the grand opening of the Star-Moon Home Furnishing Center, in return for an unprecedented amount of financial support (nearly 400,000 RMB) from the store owner. The artworks, which were produced by sixty artists all over the country, comprised a great variety of media and focused on the physical structure as well as metaphorical significance of “home” or “family”—a theme that was no doubt essential for the Chinese, in ancient or modern times. The participating artists, many of whom were used to work with small, compartmentalized spaces, also had chances to produce projects for a “large, open

space”, which proved to be challenging but also stimulating (Qiu, 99-107). No doubt, both exhibitions demanded compromises from the artists and curators, but they also provided new circumstances in which the artists may create different, context-oriented works, solicit fresh receptions, and, above all, challenge the boundary between culture and consumerism, art and non-art.

Margin or Center: The Direction of Experimental Art

The coming of the new millennium brought an “historical event” that marked another turning point in Chinese contemporary art: the Third Shanghai Biennale, held in the Shanghai Art Museum from December 2000 to January 2001. After more than a decade of political censorship, this was the first exhibition of modern art actively sponsored by the government of China. This change of governmental attitude occurred for several reasons: the rapid growth of communication technology, the internet in particular, has made any waterproof control of information impossible; the society, in the turmoil of changes, has become more ready to accommodate novelty; but most importantly, the state itself has begun to discover “the role of contemporary art in constructing a fresh image of the civilized and modern society that it so desperately seeks to promote to the world” (Hou, 2005, 33). The theme of the exhibition symposium, “Shanghai spirit: a special modernity”, testified this intention well. Situated in the most cosmopolitan city of China and provided with more funds and promotional resources than the independent curators could ever imagine, the Shanghai Biennale had 67 participants from all over the world (though a vast majority were Chinese as well as overseas Chinese

artists), lasted for two months, and attracted a large number of audiences. It established a successful pattern that was followed by regular Biennales at the same venue—the Seventh one, with the theme “translocalmotion”, is scheduled to open in September 2008—as well as in other major cities, such as the Second Guangzhou Triennale (2005), with themes such as “the great city: between density and expansion” and “facing globalization: migration and borderline”.

A spectacular boom in the market economy accompanied the relaxed political atmosphere in the twenty-first century. Major domestic museums, including Shanghai Art Museum itself and the National Art Museum at Beijing, started to collect and exhibit contemporary artworks; the latest exhibitions in the National Art Museum, for example, include *Synthetic Times: Media Art China 2008* (June 10-July 3, 2008) and *Gerhard Richter Paintings: 1963-2007* (May 15-July 2, 2008). SoHo-style art community, such as the “798 Art District” in Beijing and Moganshan Road in Shanghai, emerged, and, unlike the Yuanming Yuan Village and East Village in the 1990s, which kept their ghetto-like style to the very end, these new communities are chic, polished, and increasingly turning into fashion spots as well as tourist attractions (Fig. 6, 7). The 798 District, for example, now has dozens of bars, clubs, high-end boutiques and designer furniture stores, with brands such as Christian Dior, Omega and Sony launching product shows in the galleries on regular basis. The international market for contemporary art also grew at an unprecedented speed: the global market for modern art was heating up rapidly since 2000, and the stunning growth of the Chinese economy has led to increasing fascination with its culture in the outside world. This trend reached its climax on the exceedingly

successful auction at Sotheby on 3 March 2006, in which about 140 pieces of contemporary artworks, mostly oil paintings, were sold for nearly 20 millions US dollars



Figure 6 Rong Rong, *East Village, Beijing No. 1*. 1994, Gelatin Silver Print.

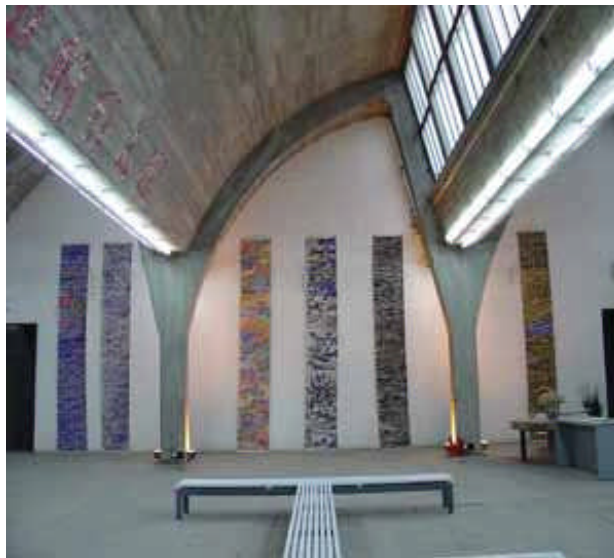


Figure 7 The Exhibition Hall of the 798 Space Gallery, Beijing, 2003.

in total, doubling the original expectation of the house.²⁴ By the end of the year, 26 Chinese artists have made into the list of 100 top-selling artists of the world, while only five years ago, there was none.²⁵ Even the experimental artist and curators themselves now have to acknowledge that their career choice has become “highly fashionable” (Hou, 20005, 30-32).

All the new developments certainly have brought much celebration in the art community, but they have also posed new anxieties. First emerged was the question of identity—a question that is by no means new, but now seems more urgent than ever. In his introduction to the 2000 Guangzhou Biennale, Wu Hong argues that the defining feature of Chinese experimental art is its “self-imposed marginalization”, the artist’s “determination to place him/her at the *border* of contemporary Chinese society and the art world.” (Wu, 2002, 12) He further identifies the “four other major traditions” from which the experimental art should distance itself: a “highly politicized official art,” an “academic art” that emphasizes technical training and traditional aesthetics, a “popular urban visual culture,” and an “international commercial art.” (Wu, 2000, 17) In a decade when the contemporary Chinese art became increasingly pluralistic and harder to define, this “marginal status” seems to summarize the field well, but Wu Hung also has doubts for his own definitions. When he discusses the 2000 Shanghai Biennale and its “satellite shows”, including the exhibition *Fuck-off (Buhezuo Fangshi)*, also translated as “Way of

24 Although entitled “Contemporary Art Asia: China Japan Korea”, the majority and by far the highest-priced, of works sold were from Chinese artists. The results of the auction can be found at http://www.sothebys.com/app/live/lot/LotResultsDetailList.jsp?event_id=27700&sale_number=N08172

25 List compiled by ArtPrice, a leading provider of art market information in the world. See www.artprice.com. To this day, the highest priced artwork is Yun Minjun (born. 1962)’s *Execution*, sold for 2,932,500 GBP (4,140,850 USD) at the Sotheby’s Contemporary Art Auction on Oct 12, 2007.

Non-Cooperating”) that flaunted a highly oppositionist title but had little to match in its content, he admits that “it was far from clear, either in this particular exhibition or in the general practice of Chinese art in the last decade, what the “alternative” meant beyond “self-positioning, attitude, and verbal expressions.” (Wu, 2002, 95) Three years later, Hou Hanru expressed the same concern more plainly. All the “official acceptance” of modern art, he argues, has “put everyone in an embarrassing position”, and implied “the end of true avant-garde”; the market boom has similar impact on this art, which will “erode” the spirit of the independent art and turn it into “the currency of the social elite” (Hou, 2005, 33-34).

All the anxieties are indeed legitimate, as the official incorporation and excessive commercialization has indeed dulled the edges of contemporary art, but does art have to stay politically non-cooperative and financially unprofitable to protect its aesthetic integrity? Although it is a common myth shared by the western Romantics and the Chinese literati, the assumption does not seem to hold in either the Renaissance Europe or the contemporary world. And, what exactly does being “marginal” or “independent” imply? Is it only a gesture the artists adopt with increasing sophistication, or does it actually provide an alternative vision from the mainstream perspective? As the above survey have suggested, the relationship between the margin and the center—the “four major traditions” as described by Wu Hung—has always been much more than mutual exclusivity. The experimental art has drawn a great deal from the “popular urban visual culture”, and has even intentionally engaged in the production of such culture itself; the artists, the majority of them received training in the art academies, kept on using their

institutional affiliation for networking and, sometimes, protective camouflage²⁶; the “international commercial art”, led by commercial galleries and auction houses, has established the most important venues of exhibition and circulation for contemporary works; the “highly politicized official art”, with their still dubious and unreliable support of modern art, has not only launched the first step towards the “systematization and normalization” dreamed by the independent curators in the 1990s, but has also inspired the artists to retest and readjust the boundaries on which they may tease and confront the authorities. If *Fuck Off* strived—though unsuccessfully—to be a mockery of the official incorporation of contemporary art, *Canceled: An Exhibition about an Exhibition*, hosted by the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago in 2000, may serve as a superbly creative manipulation of political censorships. The show “documented” the never-existed *It’s Me*—an exhibition scheduled to be hosted at the Forbidden City in 1998 but later canceled by the authorities—through multi-media, film, and interactive commentary. It not only explored the manipulative and fictional aspect of “representation” in art—to “recreate” the space of the Imperial City in a small art museum and to “replay” an event that never took place—but also reflected on the dynamic relation between art and political censorship in China at large, of which the exhibition reveals itself as a part. A cancellation issued by the government may kill an exhibition instantly, but it may also create publicity for the exhibition in question, either

26 A large number of contemporary Chinese artists graduated from either the Central Academy of Fine Arts or the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, and many movements and exhibitions were initiated through collaboration among alumni. The Art Gallery of the Capital Normal University and the Contemporary Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, for example, hosted many original exhibitions between 1994 and 1996. The Open Studio program in the Beijing Research Institute of Sculpture also hosted some of the most daring exhibitions. See Wu Hong, ed. 2001, 167.

abroad, to which the artworks can be transferred, or in China, if the cancellation receives coverage from the domestic media and provokes controversies. The Chinese artists, being alert and flexible, often manage to direct this publicity to their own advantage.

The *Canceled* exhibition, together with a number of art projects that explored the conflicts as well as conspiracies contemporary art has with all the “major traditions”, in fact indicates the very nature of being “avant-garde” in the contemporary society. Peter Bürger, in his now iconic work on the subject, defines the avant-garde movements as the ones that challenge the self-acclaimed autonomy of art in a bourgeois society, and, therefore, question the very institutional legitimacy of art (Bürger, 35-54). In other words, while to insist the independence of art will inevitably lead art to its own reification and objectification, to reveal—and to reflect on—the mutual dependency art may have with the other compartments of society is the only way to question the privileged autonomy art tends to assume in a modern society, and, consequently, the only way to keep its critical, avant-garde edge. In the contemporary world, such “anti-autonomous art” becomes more and more radical: by “a ‘cynical’ sublation of art and life”, the postmodern avant-garde “bring art down to the banal level of reality.” (Murphy, 34)

On the other hand, even with all its recent progress, contemporary art in China is far from securing itself a privileged position yet. Most of the unfavorable conditions experimental art faced in the 1990s are still present today. There is still few laws that regulate the art market, nor is there any government sponsorship for experimental art that operates on a regular, reliable basis; the domestic collectors still, overwhelmingly, prefer “works bearing the clear imprint of traditional culture”; and, the most importantly, the

general “informational factors” for a healthy production and consumption of art, including local markets, specialist bookshops, critical expertise and art education, are “still in an embryonic stage” in China (Boris, 37). In Euro-American countries, the reception of Chinese art, though steadily growing in numbers, remains directly tied to the political, economic and cultural “partnerships” those countries have with China; their perception of Chinese artists also never entirely grows out the “topos” they have long possessed: as the dissident, as “the exotic Chinese”, as the formerly Chinese turned into a “global artist”, or as threat (Fibicher, 41-7). The majority of the works that are sold in the Sotheby's in New York—or at other major art fairs and auction houses—are still relatively conventional oil paintings, made by a handful of artists from the Political Pop or Cynical Realism camps.²⁷ According to the well-known “2008 Hurun Contemporary Chinese Art List”, among the fifty top-selling artists, only Cai Guoqiang works with media other than oil and ink-brush paintings.²⁸ Willingly or not, contemporary Chinese art as a whole, as well as the majority of the artists who practice this art, still linger at the cultural “margins”, both in China and abroad. In the new age of boom, where a move “from underground to international status” may take place rapidly, many still anonymous artists are struggling for a more central stage by flashing their “marginalized” status, catering to the needs of a market that seeks sensational yet politically-correct works. The others, however, are trying to win a more secure and “mainstream” place for

²⁷ The top four “most demanded” contemporary artists are Zhang Xiaogang, Yun Minjun, Wang Guangyi and Fang Lijun, all of them produce repetitive oil paintings that are clearly associated with Political Pop or Cynical Realism.

²⁸ See <http://www.hurun.net/listen94.aspx>. Hurun, collaborating with the *Fortune Magazine*, has been putting up rankings for “China Rich List” in all social and cultural fields since 2004.

experimental art itself, by seeking for more substantial institutional support and reaching for a wider audience. This game between the marginal and central within the field, it seems, will continue to define the direction of experimental art in China.

Modernity and Tradition, Reproduced

From uncritical and “ahistorical” adoption of ideas to sophisticated and deliberate adaptation of concepts, from imitation of individual styles to participation in the overall institutional structure, contemporary Chinese art has never been free from the influence of the western-oriented modernity during its three decades of development. The impact has been so prevalent that it has also provoked powerful resistance, but even in such resistances, the artists tend to lean on another western theory for support, or to join another trend in the “global art world”. After having acknowledged this fact, however, it is important to investigate *why* western modernism assumes such an important role in contemporary Chinese art, and what *function* it serves in the artworks under discussion. I have started to answer these questions in the brief historical review above. While the first generation of experimental artists use modernism to vent political dissent and to achieve cultural “Enlightenment”, the later ones have employed modern theories, practices, and most importantly institutions, to cope with a “global modernity” that has taken hold of Chinese society, culture and art at an unprecedented level. The popularity of particular schools or theories of modernism may have little to do with the “logic or inner chronology” of the “original” modernist movements in the West, but each of them served its purpose in the its own context. As mentioned earlier, the influence of Expressionism,

Surrealism and Dada stood out as the strongest in the late 1980s, as they, respectively, enabled the young artist to release their spiritual energy, to challenge the stereotyped representation of reality, and to question the far from innocent role art has played in politics. The dominance of postmodern and postcolonial theories in Chinese art during the early 1990s was largely in response to the expansion of popular culture and globalized market at the time. In the late 1990s, the concept of “Relational Art”, defined as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space,” (Bourriaud, 113) was taken up by the China artists almost instantly, since it provided a convenient theoretical framework for the intimate, interactive mode of art production and exhibition that was already prevalent in the art circle at the time. Clearly, if the Chinese artists were “imitating” the west, they did it with increasing discrimination and deliberation. After all, as art history repeatedly tells us, every art has its repertoire of traditions to draw from, and foreign influences, especially when coming from radically different cultures, often inspire the most remarkable innovations. Some critics defend the Chinese artists with the same line of reasoning. In *China Art Now*, Michel Naridany, while partially conceding to the accusation that Chinese art is “an imitation of international art”, responds gleefully: “so what?” and went on to argue that the modern masters in the west, like Van Gogh and Picasso, also “copy” from Japanese prints or African sculptures (Naridany, 9).

Naridany has rightly challenged the assumed “cult of originality” in modern art—a subject I will elaborate upon in the next chapter—but his argument seems equally

problematic. The way the “third world” artists learn from the West is fundamentally different from the way early modernists drew from non-European sources: for the “third world” artists, the latter offers paradigms but also poses threats, while for the European artists, the former served as an exotic and colonized muse, offering inspiration without ever “talking back”. The power to include or exclude an art tradition into the discourse of art history, as well as the authority to evaluate and to interpret this tradition, still resides in the West, and the western scholars still tend to study the art of the third world as part of the postcolonial ethnography—as a reflection of the indigenous culture rather than a product of individual imaginations. Obviously, this discrepancy of attitude is directly tied to the power dynamics of the real world, where the non-European “other” is at once romanticized and homogenized, becoming “an integral part of European material civilization and culture” (Said, 2). From the perspective of the third world artists, the powerful “gaze” from the West begets multiple reactions. On one side, it stirs up the urge to join the global march, to “modernize” their own visions and techniques, to catch up with—or even to defeat—the West in the game; on the other, it also provokes the desire to rebel, to remain free from western influence, and to present their native art as a symbol of their collective identity. Both reactions, however, are perfectly compatible with the way “third-world” art is presented in the international art scene.

Furthermore, the experiences of Chinese artists also differ from those of other third-world countries. Despite all the imperialist invasions since the middle nineteenth century, China, as a whole, has never been colonized by the European powers: western cultures never managed to infiltrate China entirely, and the antagonism they have with

the indigenous culture never seems as bitter as that in the colonized countries. As a result, the Chinese intellectuals, when first in contact with the western culture, were more excited than threatened; even after they became thoroughly disillusioned with the western powers, the “fragmented” colonial condition still allowed them to “appropriate metropolitan Western culture without much anxiety” (Shih, 206). From the revolutionary era to the 1980s, there was always “a certain idealism of bridging western culture and the eastern one” within the cultural as well as artistic circles, (Hou, 1994, 81) and even to this day, this idealism is far from dead yet. Instead of the enraged or agonizing sentiments one often find in the artworks from the previously colonized countries, the Chinese artists tend to present themselves more light-heartedly, with a cynical yet bemused attitude. The most common visual scheme one sees in contemporary Chinese art is the juxtaposition of the West and the East, the traditional and the modern, both distorted and estranged, in a bizarre yet humorous harmony.

This type of juxtaposition obviously has its appeal to the international art market, but it is also tied to the social and cultural conditions of contemporary China. After a century of “modernization” and decades of revolution, the classical tradition, of which China is always proud, has long lost its vitality. For the average mainland Chinese today, who has difficulty recognizing the traditional characters or reading the classical literature in its original form, it may seem more distant and incomprehensible than the Western cultures. However, the culture memory persists, in daily rituals, in language usages, and in visual images. During the post-revolutionary era, different groups of Chinese have attempted to “revive” the classical tradition to serve their own purposes. The intellectuals

want to promote its supposed humanism and spiritual transcendentalism as an ideology against the brutality of Communist dictatorship or the “soullessness” of consumerism; the state uses it to establish the history—and therefore legitimacy—of China as a nation; the commercial culture, exploiting of the curiosity and nostalgia people feel for the past, continually recreates versions of history that sell the best. All the efforts led to a flexible and fragmented past, constantly being rewritten, at once palpable and evasive.

For modern Chinese artists, the issue of tradition is also of supreme importance. To this day, ink-brush painting and calligraphy, even porcelain and jade, still dominate the popular perception of Chinese art, in China and abroad. The artists’ own culture memory and aesthetic sensibility enable them to appreciate the richness of the traditional media, and many of them have received classical trainings, either at home or in the art academies, in which those media remain an indispensable—though perhaps secondary—part of the curriculum. It almost seems “natural” that they shall continue to explore this tradition, and they indeed did: a vast number of contemporary Chinese artists integrate calligraphy, ink-brush painting, printmaking, stone-rubbing, ceramics and embroidery into their works. On the other hand, contemporary Chinese artists, the majority of whom grew up in the years of the Culture Revolution, know that they are after all alien to the classical tradition—as Xu Bing, the renowned innovator of calligraphy admits, “members of my generation were never truly educated in orthodox Chinese culture” (Erickson, 2001, 13)—and their own works in the traditional media can never match up to the ancient glories. They are also aware of the appeal “tradition” holds for different groups in Chinese society, and the role art plays in manipulating this tradition and producing what

one likes to see. Therefore, the contemporary Chinese artists, when they choose to employ traditional media and techniques, often approach them with irony and caution. In other words, the “Chinese tradition” is no longer a cultural heritage and an aesthetic vocabulary they take over naturally. Like modernism, it provides a vital, essential, yet problematic repertoire the artists need to discover, to study, and to recreate, in a context that is radically different from its “original” forms.

If contemporary Chinese art draws from both the Euro-American modernism and the Chinese classical traditions, neither of which it does not truly belong to, does it still possess unique characteristics of its own? Most of the artists today, when confronted with this question, deny the existence of “something specifically Chinese” altogether, although they at the same time insist that only the environment, in which they live and work, may count for the special features of their art. Some of them even say outright that Chinese art “more or less imitated Western art”, or “is a clone of western art.”²⁹ The critics’ answers to the same question are more positive. Hou Hanru argues that, because of the persisting idealism to “bridge western and eastern culture”, there is “by no means a simple claim for a single national identity” for the Chinese artists (Hou, *ibid.*); Uli Sigg believes that the so-called “Chineseness” consists of the capacity to “take on board, transform, and to some extent Sinicize the most attractive elements from other cultures” (Fibicher and Frehner, 15-6); the renowned French philosopher-curator Marie-José Mondzain, after

29 This is based on the answers from 38 artists to a “letter of inquiry” from Uli Sigg, in which he asked, among other questions, whether there is “something that could be described as specifically Chinese”, and whether the Chinese artists may have alternative perceptions and expressions just “by virtue of living in China.” The majority of the artists gave negative answers to the first question, and affirmative ones to the second. The quotes above are from, respectively, Liu Ye and the Luo Brothers. See *Mahjong*, 49-55.

having hosted an exhibition of fourteen contemporary Chinese artists, concludes that the artistic activity in China is “tied to a multiform dissemination of concepts and historical references” (Mondzain, 8). Their comments all seem to imply that the “originality” of contemporary Chinese art, if it indeed exists, comes precisely from its extraordinary willingness to copy—and somehow to recreate—from multiple traditions, modern or ancient, foreign or domestic. But how exactly does the act of “copying” become such a powerful source for originality? Before tackling the question further, I will first examine how the concepts of originality and copying have been developed, in China and in the West, from pre-modern times to the contemporary age.

Chapter II

Repetition and Reproduction: A New Vocabulary of Modern Art

Modernism Revisited: Dissecting the Cult of Originality

The word “originality” has long been incorporated into the vocabulary of art history writings, but its meaning has changed significantly through the ages. During the time of the Renaissance, originality was perceived as a result of smart imitations, and a way to preserve the best of traditions in art. Only after the advocacy of the Romantic-Modernist generation of artists did originality become a supreme, indispensable and nearly mystical quality in art creations, an innovative force that moves outside of history or “diverts” the history’s flow to unprecedented directions (Shiff, 145-9). Such originality seems to have defined modern art from the very beginning. Started from Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* in the Salon des Refusé in 1863, most schools of art we now recognize as modern made their entrance into the art world with styles that defied all rules and expectations, provoking scandal and outrage in the more conventional sector of society. The artists tend to claim their own works as unprecedented and revolutionary, in their manifestoes, critical writings and public performances. The critics were also eager to point out the novelty of this art—the ones who supported it praised its inventiveness, the ones who were against it condemned their outright heresy. Even today, radical or avant-garde art is still frequently described as “modern” by the general public. The concept of originality in modern art, however, implies much more than mere novelty. In order to understand this modernist “cult for originality”, we need to look at both the inner

mechanism of art production itself, and the status of art in society at large.

First, the originality of modern art comes mainly from its *formal* inventiveness. Although many modern artists dealt with subject matters that never appeared in visual art before, it is usually the manner of their visualization that gave their works the look of shocking novelty. Cézanne's landscape and still life appears revolutionary because of the geometric and optical construction with which he brought the subjects into the pictorial plane, his insistence to "treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone"—a manner of visualization carried even further by the Cubists. Max Liebermann believed that "painting consists not in the invention of ideas, but in the invention of visible form for an idea." (Harrison and Wood, 32) George Braque argued that "the aim (of painting) is not to *reconstitute* an anecdotal fact but to *constitute* a pictorial fact." (ibid. 209) Piet Mondrian advised his disciples to "first try to see *composition, color and line* and not the representation *as representation*. Then you will finally come to feel the subject matter a hindrance." (Mondrian, 50) Deliberately rejecting the Renaissance tradition, modern art refuses to imitate nature as perceived; instead, it attempts to create a pictorial reality that may stand on its own. Formal inventiveness, therefore, goes beyond a matter of technical innovation and becomes the ultimate pursuit and essential identity of modern art. The result is intensely self-referential. As Greenberg famously concludes, "Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art." (Greenberg, *Vol. 4*, 86)

The concepts of copying and imitation, nevertheless, were never absent from the vocabulary of modern art; only the model of its imitation has been redefined. At one

level, it resembles the Platonic “essence of being”—a metaphysical existence that is reflected only partially in the merely visible; but modern artists believe that, contrary to what Plato argues, this mysterious existence may be grasped in its entirety by artistic perceptions only. That is why Braque claimed “One does not imitate the appearance; the appearance is the result. To be pure imitation, painting must make an abstraction of appearances.” (Harrison and Wood. 210) Clearly, while the modernist artists held the classical belief that concepts precede materiality, they rejected the role previously assigned to the artisans and instead rivaled to take the place of the Creator himself.³⁰ In practice, to create such “pure imitation” requires the artist to be faithful to none but his own visions. And, in order to uphold the truthfulness as well as uniqueness of such visions, the modern artists seek inspiration from either Primitivism—the part of human sensibility that is untainted by civilization and thus better connected to the primal spirituality—or reason, which, like the machine, excels in its analytical power and precision. While later celebrates the glory of the material modernity, the former serves as the nostalgic critic of such modernity.

At a more tangible level, the modernist art also “imitates” the formalistic convention of art itself, the visual heritage accumulated through history. In fact, the modern artists, in their rebellion, are absorbed in this heritage more intensely than ever. As Clement Greenberg observes in his famous essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, the

30 The idea that artists share their creativity with God, the ultimate Creator, was established as early as the Renaissance period, as it was shown in the Introduction of Giorgio Vasari's classic *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. However, it is not until the Romanticist movements that art, with its transcendentalism and its uninhibited emotional power, was regarded as a religion in itself. Such idea was further perpetuated by modern poets and artists.

avant-garde, in their pursuit of absolute aesthetic values, “turns out to be imitating, not God...but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves.” Self-referentiality characterizes modern art, and makes it “the imitation of imitating”. That is to say, while the academic and the kitsch “imitates the effect”, the avant-garde imitates the process of art (Greenberg, *Vol. 1*, 5-22). In other words, having renounced the role of imitating nature, modern art turns inward and explores its own established repertory of visual representations. The icons and stylistic features from pre-modern era still appear frequently in modern paintings, but they are decontextualized and reformulated, made into ironic deviations from the classic prototypes and bold revelations of its own pictorial quality. Monet’s *Olympia* (1863), for example, not only presents a modern parody of Titian’s masterpiece *The Venice of Urbino* (1538), but also draws attention to the flatness of the pictorial surface and the illusory nature of visual representation itself.

Because of this particular type of “imitation”, modern art often strikes its less sophisticated viewers as unfamiliar, incomprehensible—hence original or avant-garde. As Ortega y Gasset has pointed out, that the avant-garde intentionally divides the audience into two groups: “those who understand their art and those who don’t” (Ortega, 3-10). Such elitism was praised by the supporters of modernism from the very beginning, as the very nature of modern art. Émile Zola thus commented on *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* in 1867, “Painters, and especially Édouard Manet, who is an analytic painter, do not share the masses’ obsession with the subject: to them, the subject is only a pretext to paint, whereas for the masses only the subject exists.” (Zola, 91) A century later, Greenberg concluded that modern art, having deprived itself of narrative components and illusionist

representations, demanded the audience to discover beauty in pure forms, to find excitement that is unrelated to the simple pleasure of recognition and unmotivated by intuitive sympathy—a capacity that, needless to say, only a selected group of the society may possess (Greenberg, *Vol. 4*, 85-93). This high-minded exclusivity, however, has as much to do with modern art's practical need to survive as with any innate elitism. Far from coincidentally, the modernist movement in art started side by side with the invention and popularity of photography. Comparing with the camera's ability to grasp a multitude of minute details, instantly and faithfully, the craftsmanship of realist painters seems inefficient and obsolete. The rise of a commercial visual culture, the cinema in particular, also holds a popular appeal the traditional disciplines of "fine arts" can hardly match. Art has to claim a new territory, an autonomous field where the strengths of its competitors, such as representation and storytelling, are seen as inferior to qualities such as imaginative power or formalistic innovations. In order to discredit the commercial success of photography and cinema, art also has to take a "highbrow" position in the field of culture, in which its very unpopularity and unprofitability may endow it with cultural prestige. The idiosyncratic individualism the modern artists assume for themselves—a strategy that enables them to stand out in the overwhelming homogeneity of modern urban life—also imprints their works with the "aura" of the original, an originality that is directly associated with the God-like creativity. In short, to be seen as original is not only crucial in the aesthetics of modern art, but also indispensable for its practical survival and flourish.

The originality modern art assigns for itself, however, breeds its own demise.

While increasingly engrossed in the purity of forms, art loses touch with the context it springs from and turns into mere “inconsequential studio affairs”. Its high-sounding values have no impact on the outside world, and it is taken seriously by none but the “art circle” itself. (Grosz and Herzfelde, 80-5) The exclusive autonomy it assumes has become a mere specialty, fitting comfortably in the compartmentalized modern society with its own area of expertise. Being increasingly self-referential and, therefore, self-reinforcing, modern art has long grown from “a slap on the Bourgeois’ taste” to an object of luxury for the leisured class; after having secured its position in the field of culture, it has also turned into an authoritative voice, an institution that is practically the same as those it rebels against. In this institutionalized modernism, originality has become at once a fetish and a commodity, looking down on both the conventional and the popular while linking itself to the privileged.

However, not all modern art characterizes itself with the aura of originality: with an aggressively self-critical attitude, modern art frequently embraces its own antithesis. As Peter Bürger points out, the true “avant-garde”—the artists who dare to reveal the mutual dependency art may have with the other compartments of society and to question the privileged independence of art—always stands side by side with the art-for-art’s-sake purists through the modern era (Bürger, 48-54). Technical experimentations that challenged individual originality and formalistic purity, such as ready-made and collage, already emerged by the time Modernist art reached its peak—Synthetic Cubism, developed by artists such as Picasso and Braque between 1912 and 1919, was generally considered to be the first school of modern art in which collage was used in the works of

“fine arts”; Marcel Duchamp also began to produce his “readymade” in the mid 1910s. Dada, with its relentless attack on the aura of its own creations, its earnest solicitation for the audiences’ engagement, and its deliberate mixture of literary, performative and plastic mediums, deconstructs the myth of originality even further. The artists associated with the Dada movement, Duchamp in particular, have already launched the postmodern criticism on originality in an era of Modernism, in both theory and practice.

Fountain (1917), Duchamp’s best-known readymade, remains inspirational even today. Taken directly from everyday life and signed with the mocking pseudonym “Richard Mutt”, Duchamp undermined the originality of his work to such a minimum that many accused him of plagiarism when the work was first exhibited³¹. In fact, the very idea of readymade, defined as “found art”, subverts the conventional line between the imitator and the original. By turning “a plain piece of plumbing” into an icon in art history, Duchamp addresses several fundamental questions in the making of art. First, an artwork acquires its “aura” through its institutional status more than through its “intrinsic” aesthetic values. The most mundane object of daily life, once put in a museum, will be viewed under an entirely different light. This observation no doubt serves as a sly criticism on the institutionalization of art, but it also highlights one of the basic and essential functions of art at all times—by elevating its subject matters from the material reality of life, art captures the gaze of its viewers and *makes seen* of the beauty that may otherwise stay overlooked. Secondly, the urinal, though not manufactured by

³¹ In Duchamp’s own explanation of *Fountain* “The Richard Mutt Case”, first published in second issue of *The Blind Man* at New York in May, 1917, he listed “the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt’s fountain” as “Some contended it was immoral, vulgar. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing”.

Duchamp, is *chosen* by him, named by him, and exhibited in the context and manner of his own design, all of which determines how the work is viewed and, to an extent, interpreted, and therefore entitles the artist with authorship. In other words, the artist, unlike God, never creates something out of nothing. His originality comes from the variety of “readymade” things he chooses to imitate, to copy or to reproduce—no matter they are material objects, previous styles and icons, or the visual vocabulary of the media itself—as well as from the particular combination and contexts he puts them into. To summarize, *Fountain* tells us that non-art becomes art through the collaboration of the museum, the audiences and the artist himself, and the most radical originality results from none but series of selective and imaginative “imitations”. Undoubtedly, Duchamp's work laid the foundation of postmodern theories.

Criticism of the Postmodern: Repetition without an Original?

Postmodern criticism has launched a most thorough and systematic campaign against the aura of the original. Firstly, it dismantles the concept of individuality—the mystified center of all modernist creativities—and points out that the idea of a commanding, irreducible subject is itself fabricated by psychological mechanism, linguistic conventions and ideological discourses. The theories of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault lead this process of deconstruction. Lacan argues that, while other animals come to terms with their identity through the observation of their fellow species at a time they are physically independent themselves, the human infant, when still depending entirely on others for his survival, already recognizes himself in the mirrored image—an image

that, despite the actual fragility and dynamism of the body, seems complete and still in the moment of the gaze. The human ego, therefore, will retain a sense of alienation and insufficiency, but will at the same time continue to have “succession of phantasies” that creates its fictional totality from its actual fragmentations. (Lacan, 67-78) The idea of a psychologically complete and unique “personality”, therefore, is no more than a cognitive illusion formulated with the help of the mirror. According to Derrida, the thinking “I”, no matter how inventive and “free”, is always “inscribed in a determined textual system”. Any flow of thoughts is inevitably governed by the established law of language and logic; even the very concept “to be” is also far from self-evident or universal—its substantiality is largely a result of “the history of metaphysics and everything that is coordinated with it in the West”. In many non-European languages, on the other hand, the verb “to be” may assume no more than a blank space, a pause—a halt of the voice marked by no graphic signs—a mere absence (Derrida, 18-26). Similarly, the idea of an author—the privileged subject who speaks with an original and consistent style—in fact comes into being in an “moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy and the sciences”. To this day, in the literature of the humanities, the notion of the author conveys a sense of homogeneity and authenticity, which in turn makes classification and discrimination among texts possible. It is precisely this necessity to classify and to discriminate that replaces the essentially plural and transgressive existence of the author with a singular and unifying identity, therefore projects the notion of the author and his “body of work” as definitive. Foucault proposes that the subject of speech should be analyzed as “a variable and complex function of discourse”, not an absolute “originator”

(Foucault, 140-60). All the assumptions modernism held about the original individual—his unique sense of the self, his irreducible thinking faculty, his inimitable, unmistakable style—becomes questionable in the age of postmodernism.

The originality and autonomy of the “pure” form—another myth created by modernism—is equally challenged by postmodern criticism. Derrida, with his famous statement “there is nothing outside the text”, points out that there is no “transcendental signified” to be grasped outside of the world of signifiers; the “so-called ‘real’” in the supplementary materials of the main texts, with which one attempts to unlock the secret of a writing, exists in nothing but more writings, and therefore no less subjected to the rules of the discourse. In other words, the supposed division between content and form does not really exist; they are both discourses, only at different levels. The western thought, however, always presumes the existence of the original—the signifier that “is *presented* as the irreducible stratum of the signified”—and by so doing, effaces the historicity and specificity of the text (Derrida, 155-59). Postmodern writings attempt to do the opposite. It has become a “methodology” instead of a “substance”, in which the presence of the signified are “indefinitely deferred” and the narrative refuses closure. It has become irreducibly plural, with no ultimate origin but full of anonymous, untraceable “quotations”, none of which claims to be the ineffable truth, and all of which suggest the ideas of playing (Barthes, 155-164).

All the theories discussed above paved the way for the “postmodern revision” in art criticism. Rosalind Krauss was among the first critics who turned away from the myth of originality. Starting from questioning the “innocence” of modernist criticism, Krauss

points out that originality and repetition are in fact “two terms bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy”. The grid, a tool widely used by modern artists, well exemplifies this “aesthetic economy”. While many modern masters saw it as an emblem of the “sheer disinterestedness” of the artwork and as a signifier of the original state of the pictorial surface, the grid in fact puts restraint on artistic freedom and leads to repetition. Not only the grid itself has to be repeated in every work it helps to create, but it also, at once, represents the pictorial surface by doubling it, and reveals itself as part of a system of the signified that must have existed before any individual works, and that must have been preceded by earlier systems. The pictorial surface of the canvas, therefore, can no longer be seen as “opaque” and original as the modern critics have claimed; it is, instead, a field where endless repetition takes place without an ultimate “original” (Krauss, 151-170).

The art museum, being the primary agent that creates and protects the aura of originality, is also under attack in postmodern criticism. Borrowing from Foucault’s analysis of modern institutions of confinement, Douglas Crimp argues that an art museum is an “archeological enterprise” that gathers together items of “absolute heterogeneity”, and this “enterprise” is based on none but the “metaphysical assumption” that they are all original objects. These original objects are arranged in the museum in chronic orders as well as by their various definitions of “style”, illustrating a larger “history of art”, which is itself a discourse that assumes objectivity through ignoring its own historicity. Modernism takes full advantage of the museum’s authority, and excludes everything that did not belong to its own idea of progression from the account of art history, while postmodern art, in Crimp’s opinion, provides the most acute critique on the

museum discourse. For an example, Rauschenberg silkscreens apparently heterogeneous items, such as Ruben's *Venus at Her Toilet* and the images of trucks and helicopters, on the same canvas, with no intention to create a structural coherence. His art was like a "flatbed", turning the canvas into a printing shop, in which "the fiction of the creating subject gives way to a frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existed images." By adopting such techniques of reproduction, art may discredit the notions of originality, authenticity and presence, which are "essential to the ordered discourse of the museum." (Crimp, 1983, 43-56)

Rauschenberg's indiscriminate collage of classical and mundane images also suggests that, while modern art confirms its originality through its elitist status, postmodern art's indifferent pastiche of heterogeneous images tends to erase the division between the high and the popular. It is not surprising that Pop Art is often cited as the precursor of the postmodern movement, but the populism in postmodern art goes far beyond introducing pop icons into the realm of "fine arts". As Leo Steinberg, the first critic who applies the word "postmodernism" on visual arts, argues, the new generation of artworks "readmits the artists the fullness of his human interests, as well as (his identity as) the artist-technician." (Steinberg, 55-91) The artists no longer consider themselves as God-like, disinterested "creators", but as participants in the process of art-making—and in the mechanism of meaning-making in society at large. Aside from being artists, they have social, cultural and personal positions of their own, all of which will inevitably cast influence on their creative mentality. They are also artisans, who rely on their technical dexterity and expertise as much as on their individual subjectivity or

intuitive inspiration.

This conscious abnegation of originality has become a major theme in art practice after the 1970s. Media wise, photography, video, mixed media, Performance and site-specific installation, with their revocation as well as modification of pictorial realism, their deliberate violation of the “purity” of individual media, their interactive mode of presentation, and their commitment to the transient and the fragmented, are practiced much more frequently than conventional art forms like painting and sculpture. Content wise, contemporary art is often openly engaged in social and political criticism, addressing issues such as gender, race, sexuality and class with sensitivity and candor. Institution wise, museums are compelled to accommodate more and more works that were not considered as “fine arts” in the past, such as fashion and live performance, and many alternative ways of displaying art out of the museum have emerged, such as graffiti, Earth Art and the web museums. Above all, techniques of reproduction and appropriation become paramount in art, from Andy Warhol’s silkscreens of Marilyn Monroe to Sherrie Levine’s re-photographing of Walker Evans, from Richard Prince’s mock advertisement for Marlboro to Damien Hirst’s simulacra of anatomy sets. The postmodern artists’ disregard for the original was so outrageous sometimes that they—Walhol and Hirst were the most prominent examples—have been sued for copyrights violations. Of course, as discussed above, critiques of originality were already present in the age of modernism—in fact, many postmodern artists readily cite Duchamp as their most important influence—but a major directional shift did seem to take place in the 1980s: such critique has become not only legitimate but also highly fashionable in art

productions, and works that contain such critique have grown from “cutting-edge” to mainstream.

What has brought the postmodern obsession with repetition? Similar to modernism, the motivation comes from both the contemporary society and the cultural field itself. Frederic Jameson argues that, by turning reality into images and breaking time into “a series of perpetual presents”, postmodernism “replicates or reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism”, which is itself a culture of excessive mass reproductions. (Jameson, 25) The post-industrial society is so infused with “hyper-detailed and fragmented images without syntax or semantics”—such as those we see on billboard ads, MTVs and, more than ever, digital videos and computerized graphics—that it has turned into “a society of the spectacle”. The “reality”, as perceived by average urban dwellers, is already an assembly of manipulated reproductions. As the distinction between the real and the imaginary vanishes, representation becomes repetition. The hyper-realism we often see in postmodern art reflects a reality that is already lost in the cybernetic and sensationalist oversignification, and representation becomes “the real’s hallucinatory resemblance to itself.” (Baudrillard, 2-10) Nevertheless, although postmodern art may “replicate” the logic of consumer capitalism, it does not always reinforce it. The audience is compelled to look at the products of such “logic” under a different light and in the alienated context; as a result, they often become aware of them in a new way. Richard Prince’s Marlboro cowboys, for example, calls attention to the manner such images of masculinity was constructed in pop culture, and enables one to question the assumptions and messages such images convey. Just like Modernism may

portray the changes brought by modernization with both enthusiasm and irony, postmodern art also, at once, celebrates and mocks the “hallucinatory” reality it springs from.

The aggressive criticism postmodern art lays on the modern “cult of originality” also serves as a strategy to earn itself a distinguished position in the art history—a strategy similar to what modern art adopted a century ago. As Bourdieu shrewdly points out, the history of a cultural field is created by the struggles between generations, which “synchronizes discordant times” and makes the concept of “contemporaneity” possible. In the postmodern age, when the distribution and exchange of information become increasingly fast, naiveté can no longer survive in art; all players in the field has to be fully informed of previous as well as contemporary modes of art production, and to engage in the intellectual discourse that keeps on reinterpreting—and therefore reinventing—art through “a series of quasi-exposure of previous falsity” (Bourdieu, 75-110). The postmodern obsession with repetition, naturally, was intended as a “quasi-exposure” of the modern’s obsession with originality. It is equally driven by its pursuit for the new, for a position that was left open by the previous generation of artists. However, changes did take place in the postmodern age, under the concession that radical originality within the artwork itself was unattainable and undesirable: interpretation has taken priority over invention, and *context* has become more crucial than the text itself.

“Dislocated Repetition”: Modernity in the Third-World

The theories of modernism and postmodernism both “originated” in the West, but the artists in the non-western world have also become familiar with these issues and incorporated them into their own discussions and practices of art. While modernism’s elitist and monolithic aesthetics has incurred both admiring imitation and anxious resistance among those artists, the populist and multicentric approach of postmodernism seems to have encouraged them to join the global art march, to challenge the western monologue with their alternative voices. That explains why the presence of non-European and “ethnic” artists became increasingly prominent in the western museums since the 1970s, a phenomenon that, of course, was itself partially prompted by the liberation of previous colonies and the Civil Rights movement. This multicultural flourish, however, is not free from the bias of Eurocentrism. As Rasheed Araeen points out in the introduction of his groundbreaking exhibition *The Other Story*, many Asian-Afro artists try to engage with “the idea of modernity, post modernity and its formations”, but they are denied the entry to the history of modern art—the only way that will “allow his or her work to be discussed seriously and to be recognized for its historical significance.” (Araeen, 231-34) In other words, while the West is ready to add the geographical diversity of “Asian-Afro art” to the “global art scene”, it still refuses to accommodate this art in its narrative of modernism, which remains linear and monolithic. The Asian-Afro artists may have their works displayed side by side with their western counterparts, but they are still “the other”, trapped in the niche of their “indigenous” identity. Only works that demonstrate cultural differences are considered authentic and, comparing with what the West already has, new, while the ones that explore the “exclusively western” territories of art, such as

Abstraction, are dismissed as imitative and unimportant. This critical bias, though often unspoken, has prevailed to such a degree that it was internalized by many third world artists themselves: only Euro-American artists are the tireless avant-garde who push history forward; the Asian-Afro artists, on the other hand, tend to show less interests in the evolution of pictorial forms and more in art's functions in society. And, although both the western and non-western artists acknowledge the influences they receive in creating their own art, the former are often described as individual genius who end up inventing something unprecedented, while the later simply "synthesize" what already existed, broadening the horizon of contemporary art without breaking into a new territory.

However, as the first half of this chapter has shown, this western monopoly of originality is largely a myth created by Modernism. By prioritizing subjectivity of the artists and the "self-reflexivity" of the medium, this myth deliberately ignores the institutional and historical context of modern art—the very context that creates and sustains the aura of originality. An artist becomes "original" when he or she displays avant-garde radicalism and "purism", which assumes aesthetic autonomy but in fact reflects the political and technological progressivism of modernity; a movement becomes original when positioned against the ones preceding it, which in fact has prepared the new with its own visual repertory; a style becomes original when it denies easy comprehension to the general public, although it fact caters to the public's increasing appetite for novelty; an artwork becomes original when it is exhibited in a museum, which, despite all the criticism it suffers, still possesses the ultimate authority of separating the high from the low, art from non-art. In other words, what makes modern

art original is its *locality*—its position in ideology, in cultural history, in social hierarchy, and in art institutions. Postmodern art, on the other hand, lays bare the contextual mechanisms in the making of art by “reproducing” the modernist original in a new—and often inappropriate—locality, physically or conceptually. Paradoxically, it is through those defying gestures that postmodern establishes its own “original” locality in the increasingly competitive world of contemporary art.

The same logic should be applied to non-western art: the “alternative” way the Asia-Afro artists approach modernism largely owes to their particular locality; and it is precisely through their creative manipulation of this locality do they contribute to the continuing innovation of the modern. That is to say, the third-world modernism constitutes an important and indispensable part of modern art as a whole, not only because it has created icons, styles or concepts of its own, which, despite the pretense of multiculturalism, will remain periphery and “local” as long as the current world order persists, but also because it has explored the unrevealed aspects of the “original” modernism by “repeating” and recreating it in a removed—and often “improper”—context. Homi Bhabha, in his *Location of Culture*, provides an eloquent analysis of the “dislocated repetition” in postcolonial writings. Authors such as Frantz Fanon or Toni Morrison, he argues, often repeat the colonizer’s discourse, including his derogatory projection of the colonized, but their repetition is initiatory and critical. It “opens up an enunciative space that does not simply contradict the metaphysical ideas of progress or racism or rationality, (but) distantiates them by ‘repeating’ these ideas, makes them uncanny by displacing them in a number of culturally contradictory and discursively

estranged locations”. While straight subversion—to “simply contradict the metaphysical ideas” of the imperialist ideology—may lead to crude cultural relativism, the strategy of “dislocated repetition” yields a more subtle but penetrating mockery of this ideology: it makes this ideology seem “uncanny”, therefore compels the reader to reevaluate it in a broader context and, eventually, to rethink the scope of modernity (Bhabha, 1-40). By a similar strategy of repetition, the “third-world” artists may participate in the history of the modern itself.

Apparently, Bhabha’s theory draws from postmodernism, which proposes the idea that “repetition with critical distance” will bring “ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity.” (Hutcheon, 1988, 26) The third world’s strategic “repetition” of the modernist discourse, however, also has an agenda of its own: given the traumatic history of colonialism, to again use the “imperial language” is to call forth the problem of identity into mimicry and ambivalence. Hutcheon rightly argues that while postmodernism aims at deconstructing the “coherent, autonomous subject”, postcolonialism, for obvious reasons, tends to “assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity” (Hutcheon, 1989, 149-175), but the subjectivity postcolonialism tries to assert is no way “coherent, autonomous” either. Having been suppressed and demonized by the colonizers, this subjectivity was then promoted and glorified by the Nationalists; in both cases, only certain aspects of this subjectivity are selected and streamlined to form a coherent narrative, at the expense of its inherent heterogeneity. Furthermore, although the age of imperialism is officially over, there is no question that the Euro-American countries still dominate the globe, politically, economically and culturally. The third

world countries, on the other hand, are compelled not only to seek approval and support from their former colonizers, but also to “copy” the model established by them in nearly every aspect of social life, from political system and financial infrastructure to entertainment and fashion. While to assert their subjectivity against the West remains a major issue on the agenda of the “third-world”, this subjectivity seems to contain more ruptures and ambiguities than coherence and autonomy.

The problem of identity becomes even more fractured in contemporary visual culture, where to be “multicultural” or “hybrid” is no longer a creative choice but a simple necessity, for professional artists and average consumers alike. The information age has greatly expedited cross-cultural “copying”, and, partly due to the rising economic power—and, consequently, market share—of the non-western world, such copying has started to go both ways. The global producers of popular culture—with the Hollywood and Disney as its most prominent examples—routinely draws from the visual repertory of other cultures, for exoticism, fantasy, and a streak of political correctness. This deliberate though perfunctory multiculturalism can also be observed in the more “highbrow” culture, where art and artifacts from the “ethnic cultures” mingle merrily without truly interacting with each other, creating a spectacle of cosmopolitan sophistication. What is missing from this picture is the respective *context* from which these visual traditions arise; they become mere decorative signs, without depth or history, to be gazed upon but not to be understood. The incongruity and tension between these cultures, as well as the power mechanism that sets up the criteria for admission and interpretation, is never recognized in these displays of multiculturalism.

The strategic repetition of postcolonial art, on the contrary, displaces the imported images in “culturally contradictory and discursively estranged locations”. It not only makes the images themselves, as well as the ideology underlying them, seem “uncanny”, but also draws attention to the “original” and specific *locality* of the images, as well as to the politically charged yet culturally ambiguous subjectivity of the postcolonial age. Instead of celebrating the illusion of a “global village” created by cyberspace, the third world artists may “repeat”, therefore re-measure and re-evaluate the proliferation of modernity in non-western societies.

The Concept of *Mofang* in Traditional Chinese Art

Having reviewed how the concepts of originality and repetition evolved and varied in modern, postmodern and postcolonial art, it’s fair to say that the willingness to copy from existing traditions is by no means “uniquely Chinese”. On the contrary, this willingness largely owes to the similar experiences Chinese artists have gone through in the past decades, living in a third world country that faces, at once, the challenges of global modernization and the bewilderment of postmodern fragmentation. As discussed in the last chapter, those theories have also exerted a direct influence on contemporary Chinese artists, but their concepts of originality and repetition are again likely to be modified and recreated through a variety of factors that belong to the particular locality of artistic productions.

Nevertheless, copying does seem to possess a unique status in the theories and practices of traditional Chinese art—and it still does today. As mentioned in the *Introduction*, Qiu Zhijie once said that “copying a masterpiece dozens of times” was the normal way of learning in China as well as in Japan, so the Chinese artists today still feel there is nothing wrong in copying the western works to the last detail. This remark, made to a mostly western audience in a conference at Germany, may contain a grain of irony, but it was also true to a degree. In both painting and calligraphy—the only two genres that were considered as “fine arts” in China until the modern age—repetitive copying of old masterpieces is essential in artistic trainings. Renaissance and modern artists in the West, of course, also routinely copy old paintings as a way of learning, but those copies seldom claim the status of independent artworks, while in traditional Chinese art, copying (*mofang*), in most cases, was a legitimate mode of art production. Almost all the masterpieces have numerous surviving “copies” (*fangzuo* or *moben*), some of which were done by highly accomplished artists who aspired their works to be close equals, or even rivals, of the original. The imitator either acknowledged the source of his copying, claiming his own work as homage paid to its resources, or produced high-quality “fakes” that puzzled connoisseurs and art historians for centuries. Either way, his undertaking was by no means dishonorable. A great artist was often known as a great copyist at the same time, and *moben* constituted an integral part of art history³².

³² Such examples are numerous throughout the history of Chinese art. Almost all the works of the legendary pre-Tang and Tang masters, such as Gu Kaizhi, Wu Daozi and Wang Xizhi, survived in reproductions only. Even when the original still exist, its authenticity tend to be tested repeatedly against its various *moben*, and the *moben* often continues to be admired after the original was identified. The painting *Qingming shanghe tu*, as I will discuss in the fourth chapter, was one of those cases.

The word *mofang* in traditional Chinese art, however, cannot be understood as literal copying. The concept first appeared in Xie He's *Gulua pin lu* [*Records and Classifications of Ancient Paintings*], the first canon of art criticism in China, in which *Zhuanyi moxie* is listed as one of the "six elements" (*liufa*) by which a painting is to be appraised. Among many translations of *liufa* that have been made, the linguist William Acker renders *zhuanyi moxie* as "transmission by copying, that is to say the copying of models" (Acker, 4), while the art historian Wu Hong translates it as "*transform and perpetuate* ancient models through copying." (Wu, 1996, 240) Acker's version, now widely accepted, is no doubt more faithful to the original wording in Chinese, but Wu Hong's interpretation better summarizes the way *mofang* was understood and practiced in traditional Chinese art: it is an art by itself, in which the originality of the *moben* and the conventions established by the original work (*zhenben*) are subtly balanced and deeply intertwined. The *moben* of calligraphy and ink-brush paintings are never meant to be indistinguishable from the original; what they aim to do is to "transmit the essence of the original", to "copy the spirit, not the letter, of past models" (Bush, 1971, 180-83). But how was such "transmission of spirit" realized in art practice? The Northern Song artist and critic Huang Ting-jian (1045-1105) describes the process of calligraphic copying as follows:

While studying calligraphy, copying (*lin-mo*) frequently enables one to catch formal likeness (of the original). Basically, one has to take multiple pieces of ancient calligraphy, look at them carefully until one enters (their) spirit (*ru-shen*). The key to enter the spirit is to eliminate all distraction when one comes to the subtlest points...in the old times people did not study calligraphy by copying only, they hang the ancient pieces on their walls, look closely until they enter their spirit, then when they apply their

own brushes they may write as the spirit goes (*su ren yi*). (Huang, 14b-15a, translation my own)

Here the process of “looking closely” is seen as a kind of focused meditation, through which the copyist may feel himself transported and possessed by the spirit of the original. The key word here is “*ru-shen*”, which requires the practitioner to “eliminate all distractions” and penetrate into “the subtlest points”. The mental state of *ru-shen*, it seems, is analogous to that of inspiration in the west, but now the source of inspiration exists in the old artworks, not in Divinity or nature. In fact, as the influential artist and critic Dong Qichang (1555-1836) puts it, the painters are expected to “first take the ancient masters as their teachers, and then take the objects conceived by nature as their teachers” (Dong, 91, translation my own)—an order of learning that seems to be contrary to the modern practice of drawing from life.

The word “*ru-shen*”, literally meaning “entering the spirit”, is translated as “spiritual absorption” by Susan Bush, who also chooses to render “*shen-hui*”, literally means “spiritual communion”, as “sympathetic identification”. She explains that, because “paintings do not possess *shen* (spirit) as living things do”, *ru-shen* is better understood as “the fusion of subject and object through empathy” (Bush, 50). This interpretation manages to rationalize *shen*, a vital yet obscure concept in traditional literary and art theory, turning it into terms that are more familiar to the modern western readers, but this transliteration has missed the unique implications of the original term. The speaking of *shen* in Chinese art and literature is more than metaphorical. Taoism and Zen Buddhism both hold the belief that *shen*, in a form of a universal energy, is manifested in animate

and inanimate things alike—a belief that also lays the foundation for the theories of literati art, as the following passage from the Song critic Deng Chun states,

What's the one (primary principle of painting)? To transmit spirit (*chuan-shen*), that is all. The worldly people only know that humans have spirits; they don't know that objects have spirits too. Ruo-Xu shows profound contempt to the artisans, saying that "their works, although called painting, are not paintings", that's because they can only transmit the formal likeness (*chuan-xing*), but cannot transmit the spirit (*chuan-shen*). (Deng, 33, translation my own)

Dominant since the Northern Song dynasty, the literati art consistently prizes "spiritual resonance" (*shen-si* or *chuan-shen*) over "formal likeness" (*xing-si*), as its most important theorist Su Shi said plainly in his well-known poem, "If anyone discusses painting in terms of formal likeness, his understanding is close to that of a child."³³ Clearly, focusing on the omnipresent *shen* instead of the individual *xing*, this theory does not distinguish copying nature from copying the ancient masters.

The idea of *chuan-shen*, abstract as it sounds, also has a more materialistic ground. Because of the media employed, traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting are unparalleled in their immediacy and expressiveness—the "gestural effects" of the brush. Soft, yielding and sponge-like, any touch of the brush on the rice paper produces its mark instantly, recording even the slightest hand movements of the practitioner. In order to achieve the desired effects, the movements have to be smooth, steady and precise; more often than not, the artist has to complete the piece at one sitting—or the quick drying of ink will cause different textures on one surface—with few pauses in the process. John

³³ 论画以形似,见与儿童邻. Translation by Susan Bush (Bush, 1985, 224)

Hay argues that the art of calligraphy is essentially “a line of energy, materializing through the brush into ink-trace” (Hay, 89). Such materialized energy is less obvious but equally important in the art of painting, for which the technical dexterity and expressive power manifested by the brush strokes have become one of the most important criterion in connoisseurship from the 9th century on.³⁴ To make a copy of the highest quality, therefore, one cannot merely imitate the appearance of the finished work, but has to *re-imagine* and *re-perform* the gestures and energy flows of the old master, which can only be approximated and are always open to individualized interpretations. The result shall be at once emulative and spontaneous—after entering the realm of the antiquated spirit, one is free to “write as the spirit goes”.

Such a result, of course, is only an ideal proposed by the literati artists, for whom the practice of copying is directly tied to the elite status of their own art. Comparing with the traditional “fine arts” in the west, such as architecture, sculpture or fresco, calligraphy and brush paintings are naturally more “private”: they are usually of smaller scales, with subdued colors and subtle brushstrokes, demanding close scrutiny; they are also made of fragile materials that can be easily damaged by extended exposure to the open air, and have to be rolled up and stored away from all sights most of the times. They are meant to be admired in domestic settings, by the owner in his leisure time, or by his gentleman friends, during their brief social gatherings. Copying, therefore, becomes a practical

³⁴ The discontinuous strokes (*cun*) started becoming prominent in the landscape paintings of North Song, but Zhang Yanyuan (approx. 815-879) was among the first who compared the brushstrokes in paintings with those of calligraphy and praised the supreme quality of brushstrokes in paintings he recommended. See Zhang Yanyuan, *Lidai minghua lu*, 35-37. The third chapter will present further discussion on the commonality between the brush strokes of calligraphy and painting.

necessity—only through repetitive copying may the early paintings survive to a later age and become accessible to a wider audience. On the other hand, as an artist, it is a great privilege to see the ancient masterpieces in person, and a matter of conceit to demonstrate a broad and in-depth knowledge of past styles in one's own works. As the following passage by the Ming artist and critic Fan Yunlin (1558-1621) suggests, this privilege has become a definitive criterion to judge an artist's status in Ming dynasty, when literati art has finally secured its canonical and elite status:

The Wu men nowadays are entirely illiterate, and never see a genuine ancient piece; they only follow the teaching of their own heart, smearing some mountains and trees on the paper, and immediately hang them in the market in exchange for a bushel of rice, how could their paintings be any good? Occasionally there's someone take models from the masters, but they only know about Hengshan [Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559] ; their works look slightly like those of Hengshan, but while they copy him, they only get the surface likeness, never its spirit and essence, and they say: "I learned from Hengshan". What they don't know is that Hengshan models himself after the masters from Song and Yuan; he does not stop until he gets the inner spirit (of those masters), that's why he may stand out in his generation and enjoy a lasting fame. But why don't the Wu Men go back to Hengshan's masters and model after them? (If they do), even though they cannot catch up with the ancient masters, they may still end up like Hengshan himself. Only the gentlemen from Yun-jian [Song-jiang] understand this, that's why Wendu [Zhao Zuo], Xuanzai [Dong Qichang], Yuanqin [Gu Shanyou] can model after the ancient masters with diligence, and each become masters himself, the Wu men see them and get surprised, saying "these are the Song-jiang school". Laughable! There's no Song-jiang school, only the Wu men have a "school". (Fan, 67, translation by Susan Bush)

According to Fan Yun-lin, copying or “modeling after” ancient masters does not imply visual conformity; on the contrary, only through a well-informed and imaginative eclecticism—to obtain the “inner spirit” from a lineage of old masters—can an artist become a master of his own.

In practice, in order to show the possession of such a lineage, an artist often intentionally makes references to previous styles in his works—references his equally cultivated audiences are expected to recognize—and to integrate those references with the pictorial frame of his own, endowing them with new significance. Admittedly, this tradition can become over-conservative and hence inhibitive for individual creativity—a conservatism the late-Ming and Qing artists are always blamed for. But on the other hand, this type of selective and interpretative copying also produces originality. The early Qing painter Shi Tao (1642-1707) models his own *Landscape* after the legendary landscapes of Wang Wei (699-761), the Tang master who was admired by the later literati artists as the precursor in their own aesthetics, while claims in the inscription of the painting that it is the “purity and uniqueness” of his brushwork connects his work with that of Wang (Burnett, 322). The Ming painter Shen Hao (1585-1661)’s *Landscape after Huang Gongwang*, though apparently showing heritage from Huang’s work, is in fact radically original in its composition and perspective. The elitist conventionalism and the individualist originality, it seems, always exist side by side in traditional Chinese art.

After all, as this chapter has shown repeatedly, the supposed antithesis between originality and imitation was often arbitrary: in most cases, it is the *context* that makes a piece of art original. In traditional Chinese art, the role of the context proves particularly

intriguing. Wu Hong argues that Chinese paintings are often “metapictures”—pictures that “(re-) representing an existing representation”. The inner-reference of such a picture “(testifies) to a conscious effort to construct a ‘pictorial context’ that would justify any reworking as an inventive art”. It “presumes the viewer’s knowledge of an earlier masterpiece, but forces him to revisit it in a different light by questioning the stability of the pictorial convention in the painting”. While the radical originality of modern art is largely created by its deliberate dismissal of its own context, in traditional Chinese art, “the distinction between the original and an imitation is not only absent but is deliberately rejected; the artist’s creativity and intentionality is measured within the ‘pictorial context’ his works help to constitute” (Wu, 1996, 239-43). In other words, an artist’s originality is based on the position he or she possesses in the history as well as the community of art, both of which are sustained by none but the image itself. As I will argue in the following chapters, this particular attention to context, as well as the capability of containing the context within the visual image itself, is still ingrained in the complex interplay between originality and imitation in contemporary Chinese art.

Chapter III

Obsessed with Copying: Games and Rituals in Modern Calligraphy

The Art of Calligraphy: Power or Play?

Started from Wang Xizhi (303-361)'s legendary writings, calligraphy has always been the most prestigious art form in ancient China. It was, first of all, an art that embodied social status and political power. As early as the Tang dynasty, calligraphy was formally listed as one of the four criteria in the election of men for office.³⁵ By then, practicing calligraphy was already an essential part of education for man of culture, whose calligraphic skills was under constant scrutiny during his daily communication with peers and superiors. One's handwriting, according to the powerful "Confucian graphology", reveals not only the author's educational background—therefore social status—but also his intelligence, moral fiber and physical vitality (Kraus, 45-50). The calligraphy of upright and virtuous men, such as the Tang hero Yan Zhenqing (709-785), were greatly admired as a reflection of his character and copied enthusiastically by later generations, although the writing itself has "rarely been called beautiful or graceful" (McNair, xiii). The symbolic importance of calligraphy barely diminished in modern times: prominent political figures and cultural elites during and after the revolution era regularly performed calligraphy in public and bestowed their writings to institutions, which in turn used such signs of patronage to demonstrate their own authority and prestige. At the same time, calligraphy is also practiced by an increasingly large

³⁵ The four criteria of choosing office (择人之法) were stature (体貌), speech (言辞), calligraphy (楷法) and logical writings (文理). See Ouyang Xiu, 1171.

population for amusements and self-cultivation. Even from the very beginning, the best calligraphy was praised for its naturalness and spontaneity, and they tended to be private notes, letters or literary pieces, produced in the moments of solitary meditation or intoxicated pleasure.³⁶ Calligraphy writings are also thoroughly integrated with every other media of art and craft in China, from architecture to ceramics; even natural landscape has to be adorned by calligraphic writings, some of which have become attractions in their own right (Yen, 1-4).

The privileged status calligraphy possesses in Chinese art and culture comes, first and foremost, from the unique characteristics of written Chinese, the only “ideogram” that is still in use today. It is considered by many as a type of “picture-writings”, therefore naturally linked to art and poetry. As the linguist Ernest Fenollosa famously argued, “(a) large number of Chinese primitive Chinese characters...are shorthand pictures of actions or processes”—a proposition that was further confirmed and promoted by Ezra Pound, who believed the etymology of Chinese “is constantly visible” to the discerning readers. (Fenollosa, 24-30) But neither Fenollosa nor Pound understands Chinese, and their opinions proved largely groundless. Among the 9353 characters in *Shuowen jiezi* [Explaining and Analyzing Characters], the first dictionary of Chinese compiled in the second century AD, only 364 could be traced to their pictorial origins (Kennedy, 451). There is little doubt that most of Chinese characters are, at least

³⁶ Wang Xizhi’s *Lantingji xu* [The Orchid Pavilion Preface], the details of which I will discuss in the following, was the best-known example. The Tang calligrapher Zhang Xu and Huai Su were also referred to as “crazy” and “drunk” (*dianzhang zuisu*). The Song poet and calligrapher Su Shi’s best work *Han shi tie* was also completed in solitary rapture, at his own cottage during the Hanshi festival. As the literati art became dominant in Northern Song, such spontaneity was emphasized even further.

partially, symbols of sound, like the “logo-centric” languages are, although some of their pronunciation has changed so much through history that their origins are no longer immediately identifiable. However, made of tens of thousands of characters, Chinese does offers far more space for calligraphic manipulation than alphabetic languages do; and the written language does seem to possess exceptional power and demand extraordinary respect in Chinese society and culture—a fact that, however, has less to do with its “picturesqueness” than with its political practicality. In a pre-modern society, the ideographic signs, being severed from the evolving phonetics of the greatly diversified vernaculars, may conveniently serve as the common tongue for a state with vast territory. To master this written-only language requires years of devoted studies, so few but the leisured class could afford the luxury of culture; at the same time, only the literate class has any chance to pass the official exam through which one becomes the reigning bureaucrats, therefore reinforcing their cultural privilege with political power. As the historian Fairbank has observed, “The two great institutions that have held the Chinese together—the ruling elite and the writing system—have coexisted in mutual support for three thousand years.” (Fairbank, 3) Calligraphy, as the art of writing, certainly symbolizes this institutionalized elitism.

The pictorial aspects of Chinese characters, on the other hand, are also constantly explored, and calligraphy is precisely the art form in which the functional and aesthetic aspects of Chinese writing come to a dynamic balance. As means of communication, calligraphy has to follow the established structures of characters, but individual spontaneity and expressiveness may modify the composition to such a degree that the

writing becomes illegible. This apparently impractical fetish for calligraphic beauty is also connected to its elitist pretence: in order to read certain scripts, such as the archaic *zhuanshu* or the idiosyncratic *caoshu*, one has to have a certain amount of training in the art oneself; the “awe” public performance of calligraphy often inspires among its spectators also comes mostly from the technical marvels displayed from a practiced hand. In a society where literacy leads directly to social distinction, the ability to write elegantly—that is, with demonstrated expertise in one or several styles of writing—marks one’s elite status even further. However, the aesthetic power of calligraphy goes beyond the claim for elitism. Extensive training—that is, the copying of previous works—is essential for any practitioner of calligraphy, but practice alone won’t make superior calligraphy. In fact, the paradox between repetitive copying and individual originality is more manifest in calligraphy than in any other media. The process of “entering the spirit (of the old masters)” (*ru-shen*), as mentioned in the last chapter, was first used on calligraphy before applied on paintings. The media for calligraphy—soft brush, water-based ink and the tissue-like rice paper—is extremely difficult to master: they record the slightest movements of one’s hand, with no time left for hesitation and no chance for later corrections. Once started, the calligrapher has to write with a quick and firm hand, with the execution of each stroke and the design of the entire piece already formed in mind. The seemingly effortless spontaneity, as Yen argues in her discussion of the learning process of calligraphy, comes from none but hard-trained habit—the instinctive memory of the “motor movement” that produces the desired result, acquired by years of copying. This applies not only to the individual characters but also to the composition of an entire

piece, in which the correlation of each graphic form is so complex that a mechanical reproduction is no longer possible: only the disciplined yet instinctive grasp of the “web of calls and responses, actions and reactions” would be able to reproduce the essence of the original piece. (Yen, 119)

On the other hand, the extreme responsiveness of the media also makes it virtually impossible to write two exactly identical characters. To reproduce a calligraphy piece with high fidelity, one has to trace the outline of a character and (sometimes) to fill it with ink—a technique often used in *tuobei* (stone-rubbing of inscriptions) and *miaohong* (calligraphy practice for the beginners), neither of which was considered as creative art. And even with such mechanical techniques, some fine qualities of the original, such as the varying shades of the ink (*yongmo nongdan*) and the directional strength of strokes, cannot be reproduced. To *mofang* an original piece as an artist, therefore, is not to imitate the outline of each character, but to approximate the “physical force”—the “materialized energy”—exercised in the production of the old masterpieces, which is manifested in the “motor movements” of their creators. Lothar Ledderose thus describes how a connoisseur views

calligraphy:

The art of calligraphy is unique among the arts of the world in that the process of creation in all its consecutive phases is visible in the object. A proper viewer [that is, a trained one] follows with his eyes the brush movements through each of the characters and the sequence of the lines. He thus recreates for himself the movements of the actual creation. The viewer senses the technical dexterity and the subtleties in the movement of the writer’s hand, and he may feel as if he looked over the shoulder of the writer himself and observed him while he wrote. The viewer thus establishes an immediate and personal rapport with the writer of the piece. (Ledderose, 1979, 29)

Evidently, that's also what happens when an experienced calligrapher copies an old piece: a most tangible way to "enter the spirit" of the masters. This process, when performed in concentration, becomes a moment of inspired creativity.

The analysis above points to the extreme physicality of calligraphic practice—a physicality that is, however, entirely in harmony with spirituality. The brush is as intimate as "an extension of the calligrapher's body," (Kraus, 46) and only a firm, well-cultivated and balanced character can be the master of his own physical force. Similarly, when one establishes an "immediate and personal rapport" with an old master, one not only imitates his movements but also becomes one with his personhood—that explains why critics often praise the virtuous calligraphers such as the aforementioned Yan Zhenqing, while crying against the copying of technically superior but morally unsound calligraphers such as Cai Jing (1047-1126), and why the political and cultural elite, from emperors to Communist leaders, feel the need to show off their calligraphic skills. Such need was most acutely felt by the minority monarchs such as the Kangxi emperor (1654-1722) to the Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), who wanted to prove themselves as the proper sovereign of the more civilized Han race.³⁷ Mao Zedong was among the most admired calligraphers in the Communist party, whose idiosyncratic, sweeping cursive script (*caoshu*), according to the art historian Bai Qianshen, at once highlights his personal charisma and challenges the elite status of calligraphy. (Bai, 2001, 247-83) In modern times, when the simplification and computerization of Chinese characters have pushed

³⁷ Both Kangxi and Cixi staged public performances of calligraphy on regular basis, in ceremonies that "combined authority with beauty". See Kraus, 3, 11.

the utilitarian role of calligraphy to minimum, the practice of calligraphy has become more popular than ever—though, as many argued, in poorer quality. This of course has to do with the much higher rate of literacy among Chinese population, but to judge one's personality on his or her handwriting is still common practice, and rigorous practice of calligraphy is still seen as an effective way to strengthen, as well as to discipline, one's character.

Having taken the political, moralistic and aesthetic high ground, it is small wonder that calligraphy also dominates the field of fine arts, supplying paintings with visual and literary components, critical norms and sources for inspiration. In traditional Chinese culture, a calligraphy piece could always stand on its own as a work of art, but an ink-wash painting tended to appear incomplete and uncouth without calligraphic inscriptions. The author's own inscription, which includes his signature, title of the piece, dates of completion as well as his often poetic description of the image itself, supplement the visual image with both information and style; the positioning and execution of the calligraphy is also seen as part of the visual scheme. The "colophon" of a painting, which may accumulate through ages through different owners and critics, constitutes an essential part of the painting, and develops a complex relationship with the visual image itself, at once acknowledging the painting's priority and demanding authority over its interpretations. The words, therefore, become both the text and the context of the painting, and allow the viewers to "assume an active role in changing the work's semiotic vista." (Wu Hong, 1996, 45)

The central status calligraphy possesses in fine arts also has to do with its intimate

connection with human vitality and spirituality—the omnipresent *shen* which, as explained in the last chapter, ultimately corresponds with the force of nature. Traditional criticism on calligraphy often makes analogy between natural phenomenon and the energy embodied in calligraphic strokes, as Lady Wei (273-346), one of the first masters in calligraphy, says in her famous *Bizhen shu* [Battle Strategy of the Brush]:

An elongated horizontal line should convey the openness of an array of clouds stretching for thousands of miles. A dot should contain the energy of a rock falling from a mountain peak. A left sweep (*pie*) ought to resemble an ivory tusk in its luminous smoothness and unrestrained curvature; a vertical line an ancient cane drooping from the tree in its stability and serenity. A right sweep (*na*) has to contain the orgiastic vigor of rolling waves, or crushing thunder and lightening (Zhang Yanyuan, 27. Translation by Yen Yuehping).

Such heavily metaphorical descriptions characterize the Chinese classical commentary on art and poetry. Calligraphy does not attempt to represent nature in a “realistic” way, but its “lifelike” visual dynamics comes from careful observations of movements and rhythms in nature, which, ideally, turns into the movements and rhythms of the human body. (Yen, 87-9) The aesthetics developed in calligraphy, therefore, may be applied productively on painting and other types of art, in which the capturing of *shen* is also the highest goal. Thus explains Zhang Yanyue’s remark in his canonic *Lidai minghua lu*, [Record of Famous Painters of All Dynasties]: “Painting and calligraphy are of the same origin”, (they) “both proceed from nature itself, not from human inventions” (Zhang Yanyue, 28).

Of course, the close affinity, or “common origin”, between calligraphy and painting exists at a more practical level: both are arts of brush and ink. Zhang Yanyuan

argues that the famous Eastern Jin painter Gu Kaizhi's one stroke painting resembles the calligraphy of his teacher Zhang Zhi, [the stroke is] "tight and sinewy, smooth and continuous, (it) circles and then disappears [into the painted image]. Its manner is untrammelled and easy, like a wafting breeze or quick lightning." When talking about the painter Chang Seng-yu, Zhang makes his point more plainly: Chang "made his dots, dragged strokes, hacking strokes, and sweeping strokes in accordance with Lady Wei's *Battle Strategy of the Brush*." (Zhang Yanyuan, 35-7) The brush movements used in pictorial art became even more akin to those of writing in the Northern Song dynasty, when broken lines (*duanbi*) and "repeated flicks, hooks and dabs of ink and color" (*cun*) replaces the continuous, surrounding forms of Tang paintings (Watson, 1). The Song connoisseur Zhao Xigu (active around 1231), while discussing the *mogu hua* [boneless paintings, or painting without brush traces] of his time, argues that its technique is "precisely the same as [the work of] a good calligrapher who conceals his brush tip" by "handling the brush in a firm yet playful way" (Bush, 1985, 206). The perceptible spontaneity and expressiveness that characterize good calligraphy also becomes a key criterion in paintings at the time, as the Song Painter Jing Hao (907-960) argues in his *Bifa Ji* [*Notes on Brush Technique*], "the image is to be seized without hesitation, so that the representation does not suffer. If the ink is too rich it loses its expressive quality, if too weak in tone it fails to achieve a proper vigor." (Jing, 212) Such theory continues to direct the development of literati painting: instead of trying to imitate nature in a more realistic manner, it "copies" from calligraphy, and from each other—not mechanically, but with a creative intuition that may put the individual artist in harmony with the flow of

human spirit and natural vitality.

The “Modernization” of Calligraphy Since 1985

The enduring power of calligraphy, as argued above, is built on the multiple paradoxes of the media: its picturesqueness versus its readability; its thorough “abstractness” versus its almost transparent physicality; its long affiliation with social authority versus its innate tendency towards individual expressiveness; and, most of all, its obsession with repetition and copying, versus its admiration of spontaneous creativity. Contemporary calligraphy—that is, the “modernized calligraphy” since the 1980s—explores those paradoxes with unprecedented self-awareness.



Figure 8 Gu Gan, *Shangshui qing* [Mountain Water Sentiments], 1985. Color and ink on paper.

Comparing with other areas of art and culture, calligraphy stays free from the influence of modernism for the longest time—when the battle between the eastern and western cultures was at its fiercest moments, the most exciting thing in the field of calligraphy were the discovery of previously ignored ancient scripts, which includes, firstly, the discovery of the earliest “oracle bone” writing (*jiaguwen*) from the legendary Shang dynasty (1899), the wood script from the Western Jin (1899), the hand copies of Buddhist scripture from Dunhuang (1900), as well as many inscriptions appropriated from antique bronzes and engraved stones (started from late Qing). Those discoveries did help to launch a substantial reform in the field of calligraphy, which “buttressed and enriched China’s identity and thus helped to prepare the country to hold its own in the cultural and political competition with the West” (Ledderose, 2001, 213), but this reform had little to do with direct western influences. The New Wave movement in 1980s first brought modernity to this most traditional discipline. In August 15, 1985, the First Exhibition of Modern Calligraphy (*Xiandai shufa shouzhan*) opens in the Central Art Academy at Beijing, only a few months after the groundbreaking “Progressive Chinese Youth” exhibition. This exhibition featured 26 artists and nearly 80 works, most of which appropriated techniques and images from painting into calligraphy (Fig. 8). They either stretched the composition of characters (or choose archaic script types) to reveal their pictorial potential, or changed the shades and colors of ink and paper for more complex visual effects. The result was usually meant to be a picturesque “footnote” of the word itself—for example, the word *xing* (to walk or travel) is written as an intersection with two footprints. In a few years, this type of “word-picture school” (*zihua pai*), together

with the conceptually similar though more sophisticated “few-characters school” (*shaozi pai*), become the mainstream in the newly launched “modern calligraphy”.

This first wave of modern calligraphy seems as an overtly literal illustration of the “common origin” between calligraphy and painting, but it was in fact launched under the influence of Japanese modern calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism (Yang and Chen, 3). Japan learned the art of calligraphy from China in the fourth century, but modern Japanese calligraphy took its shape in the mid twentieth century, during its interaction with western abstract art. Its *Sho* school, brings out the pictorial texture and gestural expressiveness of characters in an unconventionally explicit manner;³⁸ its Avant-garde school even rejects the legibility of words, turning them into “ink images”. Both schools, introduced to China in the early 1980s, had the most immediate impact on the 1985 innovation—the Chinese *shaozi pai*, for example, even claims its heritage from the Japanese *sho* outright. But while the Japanese calligraphers still retain the monochromatic purity of calligraphy, the Chinese artists ventured even further into the colorful world of Abstract art. Abstract Expressionism came to China together with all the other schools of modern art. Its immediacy, abstractness, and most of all its intensely gestural manner of execution, connects with calligraphy easily. After all, Abstract Expressionism was itself influenced by Eastern art and calligraphy, in both its stylistic features and its aesthetic philosophy; some of its key practitioners, including Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline and

³⁸ *Sho*, which refers characters that are “drawn to be viewed, to be visually appreciated”, was used to differentiate from *shodō*, the formal discipline of mastering calligraphy. The *Sho* Art also originated from China, and included all the major scripts that were invented by the Chinese in its repertory, but, while the Chinese calligraphers were more concerned about the “logic of calligraphy”, the Japanese *sho* artists took an entirely intuitive approach, and focusing on conveying a sense of “elegance and vitality” that may arouse an emotional response from the viewers. See San’u, 26-9.

Mark Tobey, have reputedly studied Japanese calligraphy (Rose, 38-43). Interestingly, the influence of calligraphy in their works was quickly noticed and “copied back” by the Chinese artists. Gu Gan’s later experiments in “abstract calligraphy”, for example, clearly takes inspiration from works such as Franz Kline’s *New York* (Fig. 9).

Comparing with Japanese modern calligraphy, western art seems to have made a more profound and lasting—though less conspicuous—impact on modern Chinese calligraphy. As Wang Nanmin, one of the most prominent artists and theorists in the



Figure 9 Gu Gan, *Dongxi nanbei heweigui*, [East West North South, Harmony is the Most Precious], 1992. Ink and color on paper.

modernization of calligraphy is the transformation from traditional calligraphy to abstract art.” (Wang Nanmin, 3) Like the New Wave artists, the “modern calligraphers” in the 1980s desired more than artistic reform. The liberating power and radical individualism

that are attributed to Abstract Expressionism, as against the social conservatism and alienating conformity of the postwar era, appealed to the young artists as much as its aesthetics. The “transformation” to Abstract Art also paves the way to the “internationalization” (*guoji hua*) of calligraphy. Comparing with painting or ceramics, calligraphy has always been poorly received outside of the Asian sphere, where writing is rarely considered in the realm of visual art, and where the content of calligraphy becomes meaningless. Turning words into pictograms and abstract paintings, on the other hand, makes both the content and form of calligraphy relatable to the western audiences. Gu



Figure 10 Song Gang, *Diary (Shenghuo riji)*, 1989. Ink on paper.

Gan, whose works most clearly reflected the influence of Abstract Expressionism, was one of the first artists who introduced the modern reform of calligraphy to a western

audience.³⁹ Among the works of calligraphy selected in the 1991 exhibition *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*, most were violently expressive and highly abstract, conveying its pictorial energy without any legible content. (Fig. 10) The recent exhibition “Brush and Ink: the Chinese Art of Writing” (September 2, 2006–January 21, 2007) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with the opening statement claiming that calligraphy has gone through “a recent transformation from a universal mark of scholarly status to a form of abstract art”, once again proves the perseverance of such understandings.⁴⁰

Calligraphy, however, is not “abstract” for anyone who understands Chinese—even when the viewer cannot decipher the scripts, he or she still holds to the assumption that they convey meaning, and still has the urge to read them. In fact, it is the tension between the abstract and non-abstract aspect of calligraphy—or, put it in another way, the infinite aesthetic possibilities explored within the limit of convention—that constitutes the most unique and fascinating part of this art. Interestingly, neither the practitioners of *zihua pai* nor *shaozi pai* was able to lead modern calligraphy into the global art scene. The two Chinese artists who became best-known internationally for their art of writing, Xu Bing and Gu Wenda, both began their experiments with the so-called “pseudo-character calligraphy”. (*weizi shufa*, also called *feizi shufa*, “non-character calligraphy”)⁴¹

³⁹ Gu Gan published the first book on modern calligraphy *Xiandai shufa goucheng* [The Construction of Modern Calligraphy] (Beijing: Beijing tiyu xueyuan chubanshe) in 1987. By the end of the same year, he went to the Bonn University at Germany to give lectures on modern calligraphy.

⁴⁰ See the special exhibition page at http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId={D7392EA8-7E65-4040-A8FB-FEFAE51724BD}.

⁴¹ Xu Bing's career as an internationally-renowned “calligraphy-artist” will be discussed in the following. Gu Wenda, on the other hand, began his experiments in “pseudo calligraphy” in 1984 and moved to the US in 1987. His best-known works included *The United Nations Project*, an installation that used

This experiment started as early as 1983, and was soon joined by a group of well-trained young artists.⁴² Using standard calligraphic strokes and structures, they made characters that followed the epistemological logic and structural convention of Chinese, but were actually non-existent and unreadable. The making of “pseudo characters” is exactly not a modern and “original” concept: as Zhu Qingsheng, one of the earliest practitioners in *feizi shufa*, points out, this experiment was inspired by the unrecognizable words in *caoshu* (grass writing) and *jiagu wen* (oracle-bone writing), the vernacular tradition of making up words for temporary use, as well as the computer-generated gibberish. He also believes that “pseudo characters” would not be appreciated outside of the East Asian circle, where the audiences cannot read the characters anyway. Convinced that this type of experiment had little potential, he gave it up in the late 1980s. (Zhu, 9-11)

What Zhu did not realize was that the concept behind *weizi shufa* was distinctly modern and radical at the time: while *zihua pai* and *shaozi pai* tried to establish a—often imaginative and superficial—connection between form and content, the signifier and the signified, *weizi shufa* severs such connection resolutely, revealing the utter arbitrariness in the making of languages. The former still aims at the modernist pursuit of meaning and integration, the latter proposes postmodern skepticism and deconstruction. As the art critic Yang Yingshi argues, *weizi shufa* marks the true turning point in the modernization of calligraphy: it turns the art of calligraphy to the investigation of its own aesthetic

human hair from all races to make ink and to make monuments of pseudo-characters, started in 1993 and continues to be developed and exhibited worldwide to this day.

⁴² According to Zhu Qingsheng, himself a participant, the first time he saw such experiment was in 1984, from the art historian Bai Qianshen’s account of the possibility of making fake characters on an old art journal. At the time, many artists, including Zhuang Tianming, Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, Ni Zaifeng and himself, started this experiment spontaneously, forming a “Zeitgeist”. See Zhu, 7-9.

nature, which in turn leads to the problematization and subversion of its privileged cultural status (Yang, 195). When calligraphy no longer has to be the writing of words, it may instead refer to the *act* of writing itself, disregarding the result it produces; it at once questions and testifies the potential legibility of writing, distancing itself from the practicality of language without turning into an “abstract art”.



Figure 11 Wang Nanming, *Ziqiu Zuhe (Word Ball Combo)*, 1991. Paper and ink.

The postmodern transgression of *weizi shufa* also accelerated the infusion of calligraphy with other art forms, from painting and collage to installation, performance, multimedia and conceptual art. In the 1991 “Shanghai Modern Calligraphy Exhibition”—another benchmark event in the field—Wang Nanming argued that modern calligraphy, by differentiating writing (*shuxie*) from the art of writing (*shufa*), turns itself into “non-

calligraphy” (*fei shufa*) or “anti-calligraphy” (*fan shufa*).⁴³ His installation work “Word-Ball Combo” (Fig. 11) illustrates his theory well: he crumbled his own calligraphic pieces into “word-balls”, and piled them up into various shapes. His writing, though still visible, became no more than random ink patterns in the final piece. Zhang Qiang, another leading artist and theorist in modern calligraphy, launched his “trace theory” (*zongji xue*) at the same time. His *Trace Theory Report (Zhang Qiang Zongjixue Baogao)* was performed in the First Exhibition of Calligraphism (*shufa zhuyi zhan*) in 1993, during which he held the brush still, while a female artist, acting as a three-dimensional writing

43 He further elaborated on those concepts in his influential work *Lijie Xiandai Shufa [Understanding Modern Calligraphy]*, one of the first attempts to establish a theoretical frame work of “non-calligraphy”. See Wang Nanming, 2-39.



Figure 12 Zhang Qiang, *Tianyi nongying No.3* [Heavenly Playing with Clothes and Shadows], 1993. Performance.

surface, moved herself to control the ink trace left on her body (Fig. 12). Zhang claims that he drew inspiration from Derrida's concept of the "trace", which "(i)n presenting itself, becomes effaced" (Derrida, 125), as well as from Yves Klein's performance of anthropometry, in which he used paint-covered naked female bodies as "living brushes". By reversing the role of subject and object in writing, Zhang's work also seems to have

a—though largely perfunctory— Feminist agenda.⁴⁴ More schools of conceptual calligraphy have emerged after Wang Nanming and Zhang Qiang, such as the “Behavioral Calligraphy” (*xingwei shufa*) conducted by Zhu Qingsheng, in which he performed calligraphy to illustrate the rhythms and emotional contents of music, and Song Dong’s *Water Diary* (1995), in which he used brush and water to write daily entries on a block of stone that, of course, did not retain anything he wrote. In the mean time, experiments on the pictorial quality of calligraphy also continued, and developed into a full-blown exploration of visual two-dimensionality, in which the artists tried to combine calligraphy with oil painting, collage, craft design and photography.⁴⁵ Legible characters are still present in many of those works, but they are no longer considered essential; what marks a work as calligraphy is not the content, but the *act*, characterized by dexterous, calligraphy-originated use of brush, ink and color.

While distancing itself from the established tradition, experimental calligraphy in the 1990s—like experimental art as a whole—was actively “catching up” with the truly contemporary art scene. Song Feng Xuan, the first commercial gallery specializing in modern calligraphy, opened in Beijing in August 1995, launching the institutional march towards an international art market. In December the same year, the First International Modern Calligraphy Biennale (*Guoji xiandai shufa shuangnianzhan*), sponsored by the Central Academy of Fine Arts, is held in Zhejiang, hosting nearly two hundred works from thirty countries. In 1998, modern calligraphy, as an independent art media, entered

⁴⁴ Zhang Qiang discussed all those influences in his own book *Xiandai shufaxue zonglun* [The Comprehensive Theory of Modern Calligraphy Studies]. See Zhang Qiang, Introduction.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the great diversity of modern calligraphy, see Yang Yingshi 11, who listed thirteen schools.

the western art world for the first time: *Brushed Voices; Calligraphy in Contemporary China* was held in the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University from April to June, while *Grand Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Calligraphy* was hosted by the National Calligraphy Association at Paris in December. From the early 1990s on, modern calligraphy works also constituted a significant portion of many exhibitions of experimental art overseas. However, comparing with other art media, calligraphy remains marginal in the western hemisphere, with few exhibition spaces and even fewer collectors. The “import-oriented turn” that redirected Chinese experimental art in the mid 1990s, as well as the corresponding “domestic resistance”, never really occurred in the field of calligraphy. To this day, the art of writing, as practiced in China as well as in Japan, is still predominately traditional, and the modernization of calligraphy still focuses on the reform and renovation of the classical conventions, instead of on the clashes between the local and the global.

But what has driven the most conventional art of calligraphy towards its “modernization”? Similar to the rest of modern art, its pursuit for originality comes partially from the need to maintain its own cultural status. As the critic Bai Qianshen once argued: “a most important change that occurs on Chinese calligraphy during the 20th century is that it has turned from an elite art (*jingying yishu*) in the traditional society to a mass art (*dazhong yishu*) in modern society.” (Bai, 1997, 2) While “mass calligraphy”, which is based on the traditional training of copying ancient pieces, pervades elementary schools and official museums alike, the young generation of artists needs another way to reclaim the privileged position in this art. This new elitism, however, may again lead to

an artistic ostracism, a provincial avant-gardism that appears alien to both the western viewers, who do not care much about the art of writing one way or the other, and the domestic audiences, whose interests in the *meaning* of writings cannot be undermined. After all, the authoritative and personal, communicative and formalistic, elite and popular, imitative and original aspects of calligraphy can never be entirely separated; the best experiments in the field tend to dramatize the innate tension of the media, instead of trying to obliterate it. Such works bring out new insights not only on calligraphy, but also on the social and artistic context in which the art of writing is situated at modern times. The art critic Sun Xiaoyun argues that, since writing itself has gone through a revolution in the modern times, to experiment on “painting words” or “using brush” alone is no longer enough. In his opinion, only Xu Bing’s works can be qualified as truly modern, because they have captured the essence of writing in its full capacity (Sun Xiaoyun, 3-5). Given Xu Bing’s extraordinary reputation in the field, Sun’s remark was at once common and much contested among the critics, as I will examine further in the following.

Xu Bing: the Art of Writing in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction



Figure 13 Xu Bing, *Tianshu*, [Book from the Sky], 1987. Mixed media installation, scrolls and hand-printed books.

Xu Bing is one of the few experimental artists who became known internationally in the 1980s—and who remains one of the leading figures to this day⁴⁶. His first work that attracted wide attention, *Tianshu* [*Book from the Sky*], appeared in the Central Art Academy in 1987. This “book” contains more than a thousand “pseudo characters” in technically impeccable Song scripts (*songti*), all invented and “painstakingly hand-cut onto (movable) wooden printing blocks” by the artist himself.⁴⁷ Those characters were

⁴⁶ Xu’s earliest solo exhibitions include the 1990 *Xu Bing: A Book from the Sky* in Tokyo Museum and the 1991 *Three Installations by Xu Bing* in Madison, Wisconsin, but he was in a series of group exhibitions in France, England and Germany at early as 1986. His works are still in most major exhibition of contemporary Chinese art today, the latest one being the 2006 Met exhibition *Brush and Ink*. He has won many prestigious awards including the Artes Mundi prize in 2004 and the MacArthur Award in 1999, which established him, together with Cai Guoqiang, as the most sought-after Chinese artists living overseas.

⁴⁷ Xu Bing’s own description on his official website. See http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1987/book_from_the_sky.

then printed on giant scrolls that draped from the ceiling and hand-bounded volumes that spread out on the floor, as well as on posters of different sizes hanging on the wall (Fig. 13). The audiences were awed by this magnanimous presentation of writing at the first sight, but when they tried to read this perfectly authentic-looking book, they found out that they cannot recognize a single word. The “cultural shock” was immense and multi-layered. Some people felt imprisoned by the unintelligible words; some felt as if they were in a hall of mourning—for words; while others started wondering at the mystery of their own civilization (Erickson, 19). The more educated group of audience, however, refused to believe that such an “enormous undertaking” was completely unintelligible. Some spent days looking for a readable word. Some scholars puzzled over them even longer and found out some “authentic” yet long forgotten characters among them. Sang Ye, a cultural historian, found seven, and Charles Stone, a doctoral candidate in Chinese literature, found two in 1993 and claimed that “a careful examination would turn up even more.” (Stone, 407) The responses were as interesting as the work itself, and they were precisely what Xu Bing tried to provoke. Illegible words are disturbing in any context, but the written language is so laden with social, political and cultural significance in China that to show it might be fake and meaningless is doubly offensive. It was not surprising that *Tianshu* was accused by mainstream critics at the time as being a work that “opposes the law of art”, “anti-social” and subversive to “the tradition of the May Fourth”.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ See Yang Chengying “Xinchao meishu lungang” [A discussion of the main principles of the New Wave Art], *Wenyi Bao* [Literature and Art Newspaper], June 2, 1990 and Feng Boyi’s letter to Xu Bing, June 8, 1990. Both Yang and Feng were well-known art critics at the time.

The concept behind *Tianshu*, however, is not exactly original. As discussed earlier, pseudo characters have existed all through history, and *Weizi shufa* had already been around for years before Xu Bing's work. Zhu Qingsheng accuses Xu Bing for being

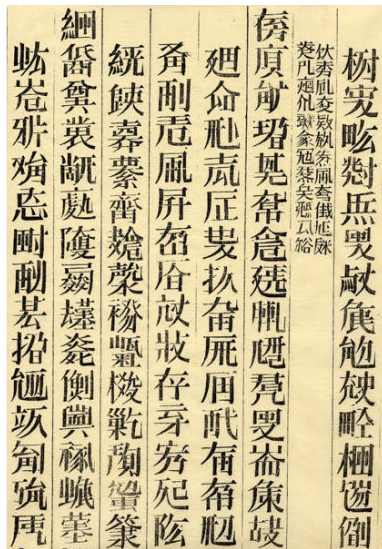


Figure 14
Xu Bing, *Tianshu*, one sample page. 1988



Figure 15 Zhu Qingsheng,
Pseudo-Calligraphy, 1985.
Ink on Paper

imitative—not only of the Chinese tradition but also of the Dadaist word-play. In his opinion, Xu is a superb technician who can execute an existing concept to perfection, but not a creative artist (Zhu, 14). His comment strikes a chord of truth; what he doesn't realize, however, is that an artistic concept never exists in abstract, but is articulated and integrated in its execution. Xu Bing devoted four years (1987-1991) to make pseudo characters that bear the maximum resemblance to the real ones—after the first exhibition in 1988, he decided to make a better set of two thousand more characters, and to discard all the ones that looked “unnatural” or “not being sufficiently aesthetically pleasing” (Erickson, 17). Using expertise from semiotics—a discipline that was little known in

China by that time—as well as his own experiences with the Chinese characters, his pseudo characters conform to the structural and semantic laws of written Chinese so well that they may serve as an analogous language of the “real” Chinese (Fig. 14). One feels that they are almost readable, that they should have existed, and it is this irrepressible yet unsatisfied desire to decipher this “language” that makes the concept behind pseudo-characters—that the construction of language is arbitrary and can be imitated by individuals—intriguing and meaningful. A comparison with earlier experiments with *weizi shufa*, including Zhu Qingsheng’s own works (Fig. 15), reveals the uniqueness of Xu Bing’s creation instantly. In other words, it is the technical perfectionism of Xu Bing’s execution that brings the postmodern ambiguity of *Weizi shufa* into existence.

This laboriously earned ambiguity brings the problem of language to a level that is at once personal and public, “local” and universal. Xu Bing often talks about how his own experiences with the written language contribute to the creation of *Tianshu*. His mother was a librarian, and he spent a great deal of his early childhood in the Beijing University library, where he “became really familiar with the exterior of books” without knowing any of their content (Wu Hong, 2006, 6). In the early 1960s, the PRC government “simplified” the written language for several times; Xu Bing, by then in elementary school, struggled to memorize those “new languages” again and again. This experience leaves him “confused about the fundamental conception of language and culture in general.”⁴⁹ This feeling intensified when he was recruited to write the “Big character poster” (*dazibao*) during the Cultural Revolution, where a simple word-play

⁴⁹ From *Xu Bing, Jin Chan Tuo Qiao*, an interview with Song Xiaoxia, Feb 7, 2000, in Beijing University.

could impart admiration or abuse to the person addressed.⁵⁰ What prompted him into a year of lonely word-making, however, was the New Wave movement in the 1980s, when the intellectuals talked endlessly about western theories, and when he “read so much and participated in so many conversations on culture that (his) mind was in a constant state of chaos.” (Erickson, *Xu Bing*, 14) To seek for some peace, he then retreated from the public and devoted himself to meaninglessness.

Apparently, Xu’s experiences were shared by many Chinese of the same age, during which the legitimacy of language (*yuyan*) and of the less tangible but equally powerful discourse (*huayu*) was determined arbitrarily, by whichever institution or group that was in power. This a classic Foucaultian concept illustrated in the Chinese context, although Derrida, with his theories of Deconstruction, was more often associated with Xu Bing’s work.⁵¹ However, Xu Bing’s experiences also suggested that personal interpretations and resistance to the oppressive application of those official discourses was possible, and his work marked a triumph of those experiences. His perfectionist imitation of the authorized—hence “real”—version of the Chinese language is a private yet highly successful and sophisticated attempt to imitate those public movements, and the thorough impenetrability of his “writing” conveys defiance as well as dignity: it keeps

⁵⁰ He uses the example of how the name *qi* (unique) in the name of the then persecuted vice chairman Liu Shaoqi is twisted into *gou*, which means dog. See Erickson, *Xu Bing*, 9. Similar cases were, of course, abounded at the time.

⁵¹ The critic and curator Zhang Zhaohui, for one, mentioned Foucault’s “use of language (as) stands for power, politics and domination” in the introduction to *Tianshu*. See Zhang Zhaohui, 19. Derrida has been frequently evoked in the interpretation of *Tianshu*—so frequent that a meeting between Xu Bing and Derrida’s arranged in *Book/Ends: Imag(in)ing the Book*, an exhibition held in the New York Albany Public Library in 2000. However, Xu never read Derrida during his making of *Tianshu*, and even says that he would never have created the work if he ever did. See Xu Bing, “To Mr. Jacques Derrida” at <http://www.xubing.com/index.php/chinese/texts/forderida/> .

its own silent integrity and refuses to become part of the public discourse. *Tianshu* is not, as many of its critics at the time have argued, a nihilist statement that says all languages are fakes, but an artistic affirmation that suggests that all expressions could be real.

The private and “postmodern” endeavor that creates *Tianshu* becomes more remarkable when displayed in ostensibly “popular” and “traditional” forms. Instead of hand-writing his pseudo-characters, Xu chooses to *print* them in the regular *songti*, which is the standard script used in the publishing industry—a choice that is meant to construe an official, impersonal and style-free appearance.⁵² The books on the floor are made professionally by a printing house in Beijing, with all details meeting the standards of the traditional bounded books (*xianzhuangshu*). The wooden box sets for the volumes were made in a village in Hebei. Xu even proposed to have an additional paperback version made by a regular publisher, “with all the trappings of an ordinary book, including an ISBN number.” (Xu Bing, 13-5) All the “standardization” has no doubt contributed to the false “authenticity” of the work, but it also facilitated its further distribution: the entire installation can be reconstructed in different locations with little difficulty; the posters could simply be reproduced mechanically, the books, though had to be hand-bounded, could also be reprinted easily and sold “in limited editions”.⁵³ That is one of the reasons why *Tianshu*, twenty years after its first appearance, stays as one of the most exhibited

⁵² “Guannian de shengzhang”, [The Growth of a Concept], a dialogue between Xu Bing, Yin Shuangxi and Feng Boyi, Feb 16, 2006. See < <http://www.xubing.com/index.php/chinese/texts/conversation1/>>.

⁵³ One hundred and twenty copies of *Tianshu* were printed from 1989 to 1991 by a publisher in Beijing, all of which are purchased by collectors in the later years.

pieces in contemporary Chinese art.⁵⁴ This orientation towards “mass-production” was intentional. Xu Bing discovered Andy Warhol as early as his college years, who inspired him to realize that “plurality and regularity are crucial” for graphic art; only such art, Xu Bing argued, could make its impact on society through “instant and prodigious duplication and distribution”.⁵⁵



Figure 16 Xu Bing, *Tianshu*, installation view from the exhibition *Three Installation by Xu Bing* at the Elvehjim Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1992.

⁵⁴ According to Xu Bing’s own vitae, *Tianshu* was featured as the single piece in Xu’s solos in Taiwan, Japan and the US from 1990 to 2003. It was also featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions of the artist, totaling for nearly a hundred times.

⁵⁵ See Zhang Zhaohui, 8. Zhang’s quotes were based on Xu Bing’s own essay “Dui fushuxing huihua de xintansuo yu zairenshi” [Exploration and Reflection on Pluralist Paintings], published on *Xin meishu* (New Fine Arts), October, 1987.

The deliberate reproducibility of *Tianshu*, nevertheless, does not make each of its exhibitions a mere repetition; on the contrary, the same installation became an entirely different work when “reproduced” overseas—in an undesirable way. The “seductive illegibility” of the characters lost its compelling power in the eyes of a western spectator, who was “free to absorb the work’s beauty without having to confront its unintelligibility” (Xu Bing, 12). The work, therefore, was turned into an untroubled celebration of Chinese culture in this new context, the very thing it rebelled against. Because *Tianshu* was exhibited overseas soon after the Tiananmen Protests, it was also interpreted politically: even the idiosyncratic way the book pages were numbered was said to be a quest for democratic elections.⁵⁶ Interestingly, Xu responded to this change by making *Tianshu* more awe-inspiringly “traditional”. The size of the presentation was considerably expanded since 1991, with light, space and shadow all manipulated to maximize the visual effect, which makes the work “stunningly evocative, even sublime” to the eye. (Abe, 61. Fig. 16) In the introduction of the overseas exhibitions, *Tianshu* was also more elaborately explained, with its various components explicitly associated with a type of ancient Chinese culture. The draping scrolls evoke the Buddhist sutra; the handscrolls recall a most popular mode of presenting calligraphy and painting in ancient China; the wall panels are been likened to both traditional calligraphy pieces and the

⁵⁶ Xu Bing numbered the *Tianshu* volume with the five-stroked character *zheng* “正”, a common sign the Chinese use to keep counts in daily life, including counting votes during informal elections. The fact that *Zheng* was the only legible character in *Tianshu*, according to a critic, implies that “all is meaningless, except the opportunity to vote”. Xu Bing admits that he never thought of such implications during his creation of *Tianshu*, but nevertheless accepts it as a possible interpretation. See Xu Bing 12.

“posters in Cultural Revolution”; the books are either made of “double rows of small character follow single large characters” that resemble the format of the Kangxi Dictionary, or “heavily annotated with dense marginalia” that mimic classical canons of philosophy or poetry (Abe, 44-5). The fact that the texts are faked, of course, is also made clear in the introduction. In the 2001 exhibition *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the Art of Xu Bing* in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian, *Tianshu* was even exhibited alongside genuine cultural artifacts of China, which further confused the customary divisions between the authentic and the imitative, the traditional and the modern. The overabundance of cultural references was meant to provide an “oriental fantasy”, a symbolic Chinese identity that many viewers already had in mind—and to revoke it subsequently. A critic of *Tianshu* thus remarks:

While it (*Book from the Sky*) speaks in a national syntax, it disarticulates such a syntax and renders it completely garbled. While it constructs a symbolic national text, it evacuates all meaning from such a text. In this way, the work calls attention to the ongoing crisis of modern China and at the same time calls into question any easy resolution of such a crisis which might be afforded by simple allegiance to culture and tradition. (Yang, Alice. 85)

This “ongoing crisis”, though targeted at a western audience, originates from the artist himself, who often talks about the alienation his generation feels towards the “orthodox Chinese culture”, and whose own cultural background, was molded more by Mao Zedong than by trainings in contemporary art, is bound to get baffled again and again in a post-revolutionary, western-dominated world.⁵⁷ The cultural memories Xu Bing conjures up

⁵⁷ See Xu Bing’s interview with Zhong Yiyin for *Shidai renwu zhoubao (Time People Weekly)*, entitled “Xu Bing: yige dayishujia de guoji shengyu he shehuizhuyi beijing” {Xu Bing: the International

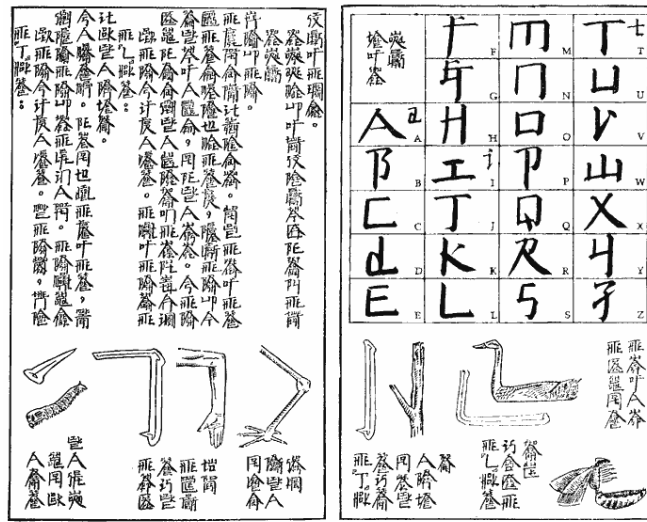


Figure 15 Xu Bing, *Square Calligraphy (Yingwen fangkuaizi shufa)*, writing materials, 1994.



Figure 16 Xu Bing, *Square Calligraphy Classroom*, installation view of the Institute of Contemporary Art, London. 1995.

Reputation and the Socialist Background of a Great Artist]. at
http://www.xubing.com/index.php/chinese/texts/interview_1/

in the new versions of *Tianshu*, decontextualized and “evacuated”, become no more than a pastiche, an elaborate but empty “imitation of dead styles”, which is unfortunately the only way a modern audience—Chinese or western—may experience history.

The modification Xu Bing applied on *Tianshu*, however, still could not recreate the remarkable psychological tension it held for the domestic audiences. The work has become a concept, summed up in the introductions and illustrated by the installation itself. Is there a way non-Chinese may experience calligraphy, not only visually but also physically, not as an abstract art but as an art of meanings? In other words, is there an “essence of writing” that goes beyond both direct legibility and abstract pictoriality? The *Square Word Calligraphy* (*fangkuaizi shufa*, also called “New English Calligraphy”, *xinyingwen shufa*), first came into shape in 1994, was such an attempt. In this project, Xu redesigns the twenty-six Roman letters as calligraphic radicals, and puts them together to make words that looks square and Chinese, but which can only be read in English (Fig. 17). The concept behind *Square Calligraphy* is, again, not that original: they are still “pseudo-characters”. Like *Tianshu*, it presents its audiences with a mixture of familiarity and strangeness—its “Chinese” appearance, when one looks closer, is merely a disguise for its alien substance. The work seems to suggest certain “communicability” between the two languages, but the communication turns out obstructed and one-dimensional: while the westerners have to “relearn” their own language, now appearing exotic and hard to master, the Chinese can no longer understand these familiar-looking “characters”. This “pseudo-communication” no doubt reflects Xu Bing’s own experiences after he moved to the United States, as a foreigner in his thirties and knew little English, but it also

simulates the situation in the modern world at large, where communication between cultures, though seemingly faster and easier than ever, often renders estrangement and confusion instead of mutual understandings. The practice may also be seen as a mocking reversal of the excessive popularity of the English language, in China and worldwide, which is viewed as a type of cultural imperialism by many intellectuals. In Xu Bing's classroom, however, the English-speaking population has to practice Chinese (Zhang Zhaohui, 19). The reversal, however, was only half-hearted, as the participants, after all, are merely learning a "Chinese way" of writing their own language.

While *Square Calligraphy* may not qualify as a language for cross-cultural communication or a critique of linguistic colonialism, it offers its viewers a relatively easy and fun way to experience calligraphy. To present his work, Xu Bing usually sets up a "classroom" in the museum, in which writing materials and video instructions are provided to whoever participates (Fig. 18). As shown in the above illustrations, the "square characters" demands the same rigorous drawing of the strokes and attention to proportions as in real calligraphy, and, in order to produce the desired results, the practitioners have to learn the proper "motor movements" through test and error. The process was challenging, entertaining and educational. Not surprisingly, the "teaching" of *Square Calligraphy* has spread to more than thirties cities all over the world, and even entered the curriculum of a few intermediary schools in the US.⁵⁸ In the late 1990s, Xu Bing also had his *Square Calligraphy* computerized—to design a program that have the

⁵⁸ For a list of cities in which *Square Calligraphy* was exhibited, see Erickson, 68. The first school that did so was Sidwell Friends School at Washington D.C. right after Xu Bing's solo at Sackler in 2001. Several private schools in New York tried the same thing years later. It was also used in some English as Second Language courses.

English words transferred to square characters automatically—and used the program in later works, such as the installation *What's Your Surname Please (Ninguixing)* in the 1998 exhibition *Unreadable Books, New Letters* at the Mitaka City Art Center, in which the visitors were asked to enter their first names and have them “translated” into square characters by the computer; then they may practice writing those “surnames” in square calligraphy. Clearly, comparing with *Tianshu*, *Square Calligraphy* is more approachable, interactive, and “popular”. It has become a *method*, a game with mechanical rules and the potential of being infinitely reproducible.

While the majority of modern calligraphers try to separate themselves from the “mass calligraphy” and to be “original”, Xu Bing deliberately deprives calligraphy of its aura and makes it increasingly “mass appealing”. As mentioned earlier, Xu Bing was fascinated with the concept of repetition and reproduction even before he created *Tianshu*, and the visual impact of *Tianshu* was “very much related to the repetitive quality of the printing process.”⁵⁹ In *Square Calligraphy*, the mechanical reproductivity is thoroughly carried out, to an extent that the artist’s individual creativity becomes programmable and his own personality completely invisible. The result, however, is a wider appeal of the work, and more intimate experiences for its audiences. As Walter Benjamin describes, “mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art...characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert.” (Benjamin, 12) This “orientation of the

⁵⁹ From “Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing”, an interview by Glenn Hopper. See < http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/texts/a_conversation_with_xu_bing1/>.

expert”, of course, is largely delusional, but the enjoyment could be sincere and powerful.

Xu Bing's interest in the mechanical reproduction and the consequent “mass appeal” of his art draws from the concepts of western postmodernism, but it also has a distinctly Chinese resource. From the late 1990s on, Xu Bing repeatedly declared in interviews that art should “serve the people” (*wei renmin fuwu*), and even designed a series of “art serves the people” banners, in square calligraphy, for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1999. A well-known phrase coined by Mao Zedong, the slogan served as the leading principle for not only art, but also for all aspects of cultural life in China during the Revolution era. Xu Bing's understanding of the phrase, on the other hand, draws from but also differs from its original implications. He insists that his works will not “reform or change the society”, but he hopes that they “will reach the broadest spectrum of people possible, everybody from the art expert to the average person.”⁶⁰ While *Tianshu* enables the average Chinese to approach modern art, *Square Calligraphy* allows the ordinary westerners to experience the alien art of calligraphy; both works, however, leads to a reassessment of their own culture heritage.

Qiu Zhijie: Maximum Repetition, Minimum Results

⁶⁰ Alexa Olesen. “Xu Bing: Twixt East and West.” *Virtual China*, October 6, 1999. See www.virtualchina.com/

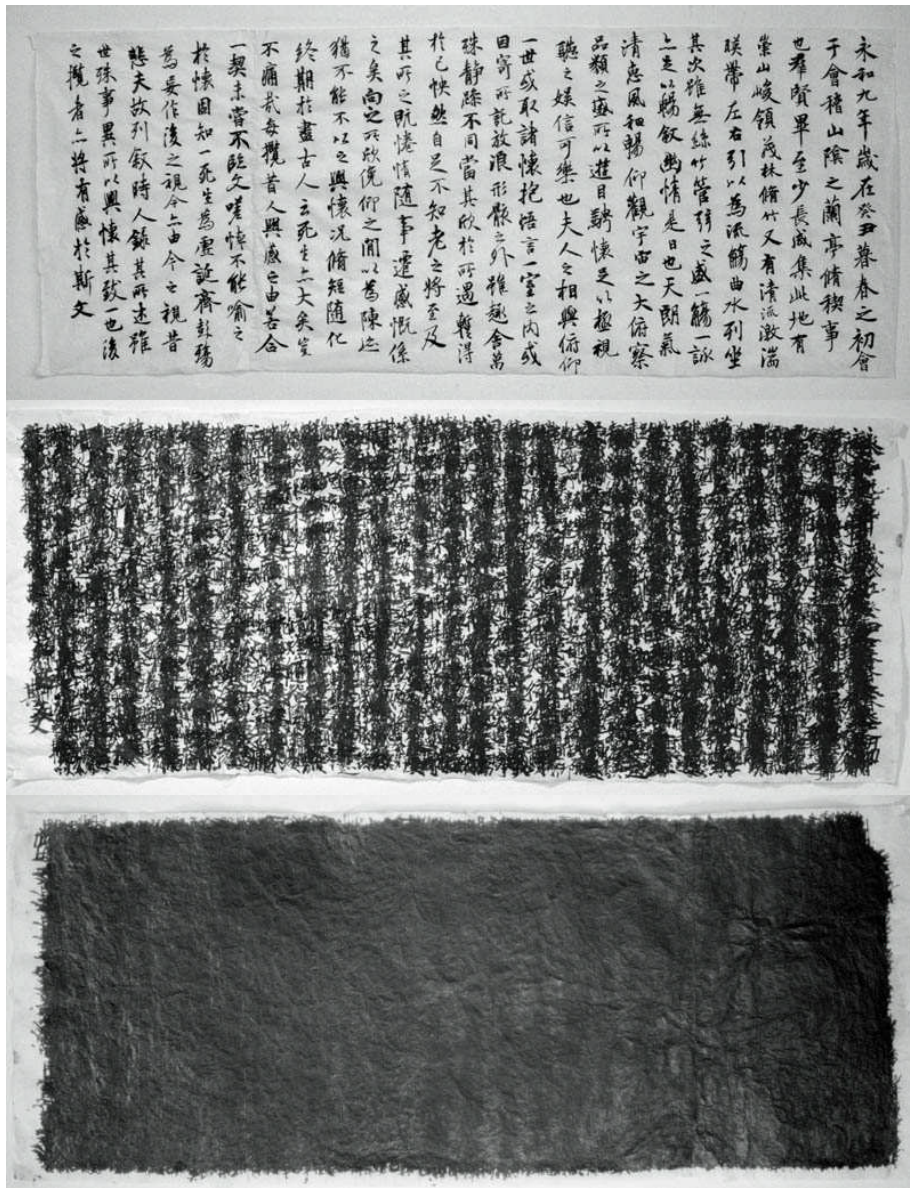


Figure 19 Qiu Zhijie, *Chaoxie Lantingjixu yiqian bian* (Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface for a Thousand Times). 1990-1992. Ink on paper.

If Xu Bing's fascination with the concept of repetition appears increasingly mechanical and communal, Qiu Zhijie's obsession with copying seems intensely physical

and personal. Like Xu Bing, he received his B.F.A. in the printmaking department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and he has since grown into one of the most prolific artists and critics living in China, taking a leading role in fields ranging from photography and video to performance art and independent curatorship. Calligraphy, however, remains the center of his artistic activities. In his essay “Hanzi de liliang” [The Power of Chinese Characters], Qiu argues that words, considered more “real” than images in traditional Chinese art, are the entry point towards a truly “Chinese method” (*zhonggu fangfa*) in art (Qiu, 224-33). His best-known work, *Copying the Orchid Pavilion Preface a Thousand Times* (*Chaoxie Lantingjixu Yiqianbian*), suggests such a method. For years, he kept on copying Wang Xizhi’s *Lanting ji xu* [*The Orchid Pavilion Preface*], the undisputed paradigm of all traditional calligraphy and the most prestigious work in the history of Chinese art, on a single piece of paper. Apparently, only the first copy was a “regular” and readable work, the following ones became increasingly smudged and “abstract”. The paper turned pitch black after the first fifty copies, and subsequent writing was merely adding invisible ink-marks (Fig. 19). This deliberate waste of labor strikes a chord with postmodern aesthetics immediately, as Sheldon Lu points out:

The solemn practice of calligraphy was transformed into a meaningless postmodern game, an absurd play of signifier without signification. Indeed, the repetitive, mechanical nature of Qiu's work allows the viewer to question the cherished rituals and procedures in traditional Chinese art and culture. Yet on another level, after endless copying, the paper was turned into a multilayered, richly-textured, painterly surface, which seemed to become a new kind of material and medium for artistic expression (Lu, 87).

What Lu suggests here is that Qiu, through his “meaningless” copying, has challenged the Chinese tradition while exploring the postmodern obsession with the materiality of the media. The Chinese art critic Gao Minglu’s interpretation takes a more “pro-Chinese” perspective, yet he also turns towards a postmodern direction. He points out that the original *Lantingjixu* has never been seen since 649 AD, when the emperor Tang Taizong, a most enthusiastic promoter of Wang’s calligraphy, reputedly had the work buried with him. The legendary status of the work is therefore sustained through “a large and varied number of reproductions and forgeries” that include hand copies, carved stones and stone rubbing (Ledderose, 1979, 13-20). Gao argues that Qiu’s work, therefore, represents a pursuit for the “original” in the absence of the original—an original that “exists not in the visible document, but in the cumulative memories and imaginations of numerous individuals” (Gao, 2005, 154).

Both Lu and Gao's readings confer valuable insights to Qiu's work, but neither has much to do with the artist's own explanation of his obsessive copying. “Medium-wise,” he says, “(*Copying*) is a returning to the core of Chinese calligraphy, not innovation in any sense of the word.” To reach this core, he further argues, one has to first take out the literary aspect (*wenxue xing*) of writing and turns it into a plastic art (*zaoxing yishu*), then to stop paying attention to the “ink trace” that constitutes this plastic art and to see the entire process as the *act* of writing itself. Calligraphy, therefore, becomes a performance art, “a mini-dance performed by the writer, under the excuse of producing visible

results.”⁶¹ The dexterous, expressive use of the brush, normally the means towards a successful piece of calligraphy, becomes the end itself in Qiu’s *Copying*, in which the entire body of the writer is involved in a rapturous “mini-dance”. But why does the “mini-dance” have to be launched by the copying of an ancient masterpiece, instead of by the creation of an original piece? The paradox of copying and originality, which characterizes the art of calligraphy of all times, comes into full play here. Historically, *Lantingjixu* established the tradition that calligraphy should be an art of spontaneity. Wang Xizhi created the piece at a drinking-party at the Orchid Pavilion, during which his gentlemen friends composed a body of poems and Wang, in a tipsy revelry, composed and wrote out a preface on the spot. The story goes that when Wang tried to rewrite it afterwards, he was unable to reproduce the freshness and vitality—the spirit (*shen*), that is—of the original (Willetts, 87). As Qiu remarks, the fact that a draft like *Lantingjixu* was taken as an unsurpassable classic proves that a “selfless and uncontrived” (*wangwo de feikeyi xing*) outpour of spirits is the ultimate pursuit in Chinese art. Calligraphy, therefore, has truly becoming an *act*, referring to the “remembrance of the physical as well as spiritual state of being”, not the material trace of ink on paper.⁶²

Clearly, the original *Lantingxu* captures the inspiration Wang felt at the moment in the physical movements that produced each of the characters, which constitute a wondrous display of elegance and energy; Qiu’s repetitive copying, on the other hand, is a persistent attempt to approximate those movements, to evoke the imaginary

⁶¹ See *Guanyu zuopin yihao de ziwo chenshu* [Self-Account on Work No.1], from Qiu’s official website at < <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/html/calligraphy/lantingxu.html> > . The essay also appears in Qiu’s book *Ziyou de youxianxing* [The Limit of Freedom]. Translation by myself.

⁶² Same as 61.

“remembrance” of the original. Through this process, he may establish an “immediate and personal rapport” with the old master, and consequently, with the environment and mindset that prompted his ingenious performance. As the photographic recording of *Copying* shows, Qiu has tried to perform his copying at different locations, including outdoor settings that resemble the orchid pavilion of Wang's description, apparently in an effort to facilitate his connection with the old mater. On the other hand, when unable to see the ink-trace of his own copies, the writer may immerse himself in the imaginative “imitation” of the original movements without paying any attention to the material product. His “mini-dance”, practiced again and again with disciplined concentration, becomes a meditative process, during which writing is no longer “art” in the modern sense of the word—that is, the production of an object—but a cultivation of character and an enlightened way of life, which was actually the way art and poetry were viewed in classical Chinese culture. In this manner, Qiu’s obsessive copying is indeed a return to the very core of traditional calligraphy.

Qiu’s method of creating *Copying*, however, is far from purely “traditional”. Gao Minglu, among other critics, have contributed the labor-intensive process of Qiu’s work, as well as the “meaningless result” it produced, to the influence of Western Maximalism (*jiduo zhuyi*), which, in his definition, is characterized by “continuous repetition and monotonous labor” that intend to “eliminate any desire of self-expression” (Gao, 2005, 151-2). Qiu himself, however, claims that *Copying* was inspired by his studying of the Fluxus movement in 1990, which prompted him to think about “the matter of time in

plastic art.”⁶³ While how Qiu interprets the Fluxus art movement remains unclear,⁶⁴ *Copying* indeed suggests an alternative perception of time that is at once postmodern and Chinese. In the modern age, we tend to look at the reproduction of images and words, which may be completed in a splitting second, as a spatial expansion of the original; Qiu’s *Copying*, on the other hand, packs a thousand copies onto the same space. The final product, therefore, becomes a document of *time* that was spent during the process of copying, fleeting yet palpable. While the pattern of copying seems constant and enduring, the individuality of each copy, soon to be covered by the next layer, becomes transitory and unrecoverable.

Such perception of time could be thus expanded: all individual beings change and perish, but life flows on in fairly repeatable patterns. Qiu believes that this observation, described aphoristically as *wuchang* (impermanence) in Chinese, represents the most intimate, profound and unique part of the so-called Chinese mentality. In an conversation he had with a fellow artist Shu Kewen, he argues that *Wuchang*, originally a Buddhist concept, has pervaded every branch of Chinese philosophy, literature and art as well as the everyday life of ordinary Chinese, yet it remains evasive and almost untranslatable. However, comparing with the more “universal” and exotic symbols such as *taiji* or *fengshui*, *wuchang* captured the true essence of the Chinese spirit, and will remain the

⁶³ Same as 61.

⁶⁴ An international art movement formed in the early 1960s, the Fluxus takes its names from the Latin word “flow”, or “a continuing succession of changes”. Embodying the Neo-Dada spirit, it emphasizes the concept of anti-art and “intermedia”, and presents its works as brief and communal “events” where different modes of expressions interact. However, comparing with contemporary movements such as Happenings and the Beats, the Fluxus tends to be more conceptual and impersonal. It seems that Qiu’s most interested in the “flowing” aspect of the Fluxus.

emotional center of his own art.⁶⁵ In practice, the idea of *wuchang* is manifested in the particular way “trace” or “mark” is constituted in Qiu’s works: in the vast expanse of space and time, an individual existence leaves no more than a “mark”, soon forgotten and barely decipherable, but the sentiments may echo infinitely in the following generations. The pitch-black end product of *Copying* is such a mark, rich, melancholy yet calm and impenetrable. Far from coincidentally, *Lantingjixu* itself is a classical piece that lavishes on this very sentiment. After praising the beauty of nature and the exuberance of the present occasion, Wang Xizhi proceeds to lament the transience of all pleasures and the fact that all lives turn into dust. Having no illusion for immortality, he nevertheless finds comfort in knowing that he shares his sentiments with his ancestors, and that people in the future generations may likewise be touched by his own words. This ultimate infusion of change and repetition, transience and permanence, reflected in the power of words and captured by the practice of calligraphic copying, becomes more manifested than ever in Qiu’s futile yet ritualistic copying of this masterpiece.

⁶⁵ See *Shuowenjiezi zuowei yizhong shenghuo*, [Deciphering Words as a Way of Life], a dialogue between Qiu Zhijie and Shu Kewen, at <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/html/critiques/020.htm>. In his explanation of his own works, including *Cenotaph* and *Photo-Calli-Graphy*, Qiu repeatedly emphasizes the importance of conveying *wuchang* in those works.



Figure 20 Qiu Zhijie, *Jinianbei—jiyi kaogu* [*Cenotaph—Archeology of Memory*], mixed media installation, 2007



Figure 21 Qiu Zhijie, *Jinianbei—jiyi kaogu*, in process, 2006

Copying and repetition, therefore, is firmly linked to memory in Qiu's works: like memory, it builds a connection between the past and the present—a connection that is, again like memory, fragile and unreliable. Qiu keeps on exploring the aspect of time in

calligraphy-related works after *Copying*. One of his recent works, *Jinianbei—jiyi kaogu* [Cenotaph—Archeology of Memory], is another monumental yet deliberately “futile” undertaking to keep the calligraphic memories. He started with collecting eight categories of phrases that were circulated widely throughout history, from revolutionary slogans and newspapers headings to pop song lyrics and computerized gibberish, then he carved the words on a slab of cement, rubbed it onto paper, put on another layer of cement and repeated the same process until the slab became as thick as a cube, and finally covered it all up with plain cement. The result, after one year’s labor, is eight “cenotaphs”, with all the history and memory buried underneath the austere surface, and Qiu puts them on display with all the rubbings hanging around (Fig. 20, 21). In a way, this project simulates the actual working process of human memories: the present always layers upon and therefore practically “erases” the past; only the verbal “copying” of such memories, in forms of the rubbed hangings, may preserve the otherwise invisible memories of history. On the other hand, the “archeology” aspect of project, inspired by Foucault’s archeology of knowledge, attempts to salvage the part of memory that was obliterated by the official discourse of history. What the eight cenotaph shows is a steady removal of words from the public sphere to the private sphere, increasingly obscure and irrelevant to the society at large while more and more intimate to the individuals.

Qiu’s own interest in this project, however, seems to reside more in the interactions between calligraphy styles and the content they signify. While Xu Bing notices that the Song script gives the texts an official, authoritative “aura”, Qiu identifies a “history of calligraphic styles” that reflect the spirit of the ages. He finds out that the

angular and “masculine” New Wei style (*xinweiti*), favored by the early revolutionaries like Kang Youwei as a statement against the fluid and elegant *xingshu* tradition, became the dominate style during the Cultural Revolution. This *xinweiti*, however, was again been replaced by more plump and “feminine” styles in recent years, as the catchphrases of the time have also changed from revolutionary slogans to whispers of pleasure, as the pop songs lyrics and private letters in the second half of the project well exemplified. But the power of certain “personal” styles perseveres in the new context, such as Mao’s idiosyncratic *caoshu*, which still endows many institutions with symbolic privileges, and which is still collected and copied by many individuals today, including Qiu himself, for various purposes⁶⁶. Again, the repetitive copying—and the consequent popularity—of a particular writing style are directly related to the ideology and “character” it manifests. The form and content of calligraphy, as the “archeological research” of *Cenotaph* shows, may communicate with its viewers at multiple fronts.

Cenotaph, on the other hand, may be seen as a eulogy for the passing of the “calligraphy age”: the last two of the eight cubes are reserved for the “unreadable texts” created by mis-coded emails and computer viruses, both are free from the work of hands and pointing to the absence of conventional calligraphy in everyday lives. There is no question that images have long started to replace words as the keeper of historical as well

⁶⁶ Qiu explains his interests in the calligraphic aspect of *Cenotaph* in the press release of the exhibition, on *China News Week* (July 16, 2007, 87), during an interview with *The Chinese Youth* (*Zhongguo qingnian bao*) and in his official site at <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/html/calligraphy/jinianbei.htm>. His work *Entrance: Mao’s Calligraphy* is completed in 2004, where he photographs dozens of Mao’s writings in a variety of environments, and assembles them together with digital processing.



立冬之日，水始冰，地始冻。冬，终也。
中山中路是民国时代留下的老街，我所拍摄的地点是靠近鼓楼的南段。这里在南宋时，应该是杭州城的中心区，应该相当于今天的王府井。民国的老房子门面华洋杂陈，当时一定和今天的娱乐场所那些后现代罗马柱一样显得光怪陆离，极不协调。几十个立冬之后，他们一起衰老了，在初冬的风里相依为命。

Figure 22 Qiu Zhijie, *24 Jieqi: Lidong* [24 Seasons: the Start of Winter], color photograph, 2005. (Explanatory caption on the right added by artist himself)

as personal memories, and as a renowned media artist, Qiu is always looking for ways to combine calligraphy and photography. His *Calli-Photo-Graphy* (*Guangxie shufa*) series first came out in 2004, and he has applied the method on a great variety of occasions ever since: he “writes” with a flashlight in the air, usually against a dark background, and uses the camera, with prolonged exposure time, to capture the otherwise invisible words. (Fig. 22) The writing process, as Qiu remarks himself, feels a lot like real calligraphy, since the camera responds to light even more sensitively than the rice paper to ink, and any lingering of the “light brush” will alter the look of the characters in the final print. Even the condition of light and air in the background could have strong impact on the quality of the writing in the final product, and the artist has to react to the environment with

supreme alertness and spontaneity.⁶⁷ If Qiu's copying of *Lantingjixu* still leaves tangible, material—though unreadable—marks, the light writings evaporate as soon as they come to exist: it is almost like they never existed in reality. However, the “reality” is merely what we see with naked eyes, and the non-existing writings can be brought to life by the camera, with dream-like yet deceptively realistic results. The words become time itself, substantial and ungraspable at the same time, and can only be “frozen” and reproduced by photographic recordings.

The words Qiu chooses to write in *Calli-Photo-Graphy* usually serve like inscriptions for the background “sceneries”; some as titles for the scenery itself, others record the author's feelings provoked by the environment. The *24 Seasons* photographic series, for example, “memorize” the uniquely Chinese marks of time with both the scenery photographed on the very day and the light-writing of the name of the “season” imprinted, as if the author, inspired by the beauty of the time, tries to leave a personal mark on the spot. One may see this type of “spontaneous calligraphy” everywhere in China. At the first sight, it resembles graffiti in the western art, but instead of being an act of vandalism, it often aims at attaching the impermanent self to the immortality of words.⁶⁸ The 2005 photo series *607 Now (607 ge xianzai)* seems to exemplify such attachment. For twenty-four hours, Qiu used light to repeatedly write the word “*xianzai*” (now, present) on the same background, and assembles the 607 pictures taken in the

⁶⁷ See “Guang yu ci” [Light and Words], the self-introduction for *Calli-Photo-Graphy* series at <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/html/Photography/where.htm>.

⁶⁸ In ancient times, such “graffiti” was frequently practiced by members of the literati class, and was revered as evidences of their ingenuousness, and sometimes as the “highlights” of the sceneries themselves. In modern times, such graffiti are mostly individual names, written or carved on the walls in every sightseeing spot in China.

process in a film-like sequence (Fig. 23). Rivaling Andy Warhol's silent film *Empire* (1964) in its unabashed tediousness, this “mini-film” records none but the artist's almost frantic attempt to “seize the present”. Again, the act of repetitive writing becomes a ritual, through which the mystic power of the word *xianzai* is evoked again and again, as

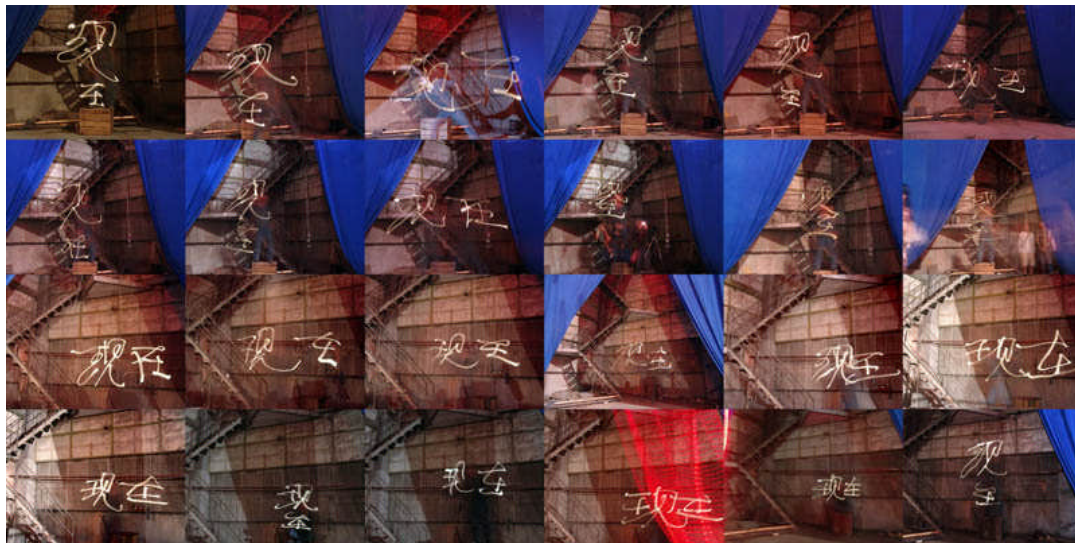


Figure 23 Qiu Zhijie, *607 ge xianzai* [607 Now]. Colored photographs, 2005.

if it could cast a spell on reality. This attempt to immortalize the present is futile but intriguing. As the art critic Christina Yu points out, as soon as the word “*xianzai*” is completed, “what was ‘now’ had already become the past”; the viewers, therefore, are compelled to see the discrepancy between the signifier and the signified, and to ask “what is ‘now’ anyway? Does it really exist?”⁶⁹

The ritualistic repetition in *607 Now* cannot freeze the present, but it manages to record the pass of time in the most minute and intimate manner: seeing the same word on

⁶⁹ Yu, Christina, “Light-Writing: Qiu Zhijie’s New Works” at <http://www.qiuzhijie.com/html/critiques/e-005.htm>.

the same minimal and monotonous background for such an extended period of time, one starts to notice the consistency as well as the otherwise invisible changes in each frame, such as the moving of light and shadows—all captured by the tireless camera. Like Warhol's *Empire*, Qiu's work reminds the viewers that the camera is a machine capable of paying attention to anything for any length of time—the only media, in Warhol's words, “to see time goes by”. In this sense, Qiu's *Calli-Photo-Graphy* seems to suggest that photography will inevitably replace calligraphy as the keeper of memories.

Chapter IV

Simulacrum or Reality: Irony and Emulation in Experimental

Photography

The Art of the Camera: Realism or Manipulation

The invention of photography has had the most profound impact on modern art, and the impact largely comes from the camera's extraordinary ability to "reproduce" reality and to duplicate itself, instantaneously and prodigiously. Of course the techniques of reproduction, such as lithography and wood printing, have always existed, but as Walter Benjamin points out, photography "freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking-into a lens," and sped up the process enormously. This "freedom" has two consequences for the artists. First, as mentioned in the second chapter, with the camera's ability to grasp "a multitude of minute details" at one glimpse, the illusionist, mimetic type of paintings, which have been the pinnacle of western art since the Renaissance, seem to become obsolete. The painters now have to pursue different modes of expressions in order to justify their own existence in the cultural field. Secondly, while the pre-modern mode of reproduction in fact highlights the distinctive nature of the original, which can only be earned "throughout the time of its existence", the art of photography makes no distinctions between the original and the reproduced. A negative may develop numerous prints, none of which can claim to be more "original" than the others. Also, after being exposed to a great plurality of reproductions in casual, everyday settings, the viewer no longer feels the "uniqueness and

permanence” while encountering the “original”, be it art or nature itself. The “aura” is severely damaged, and art is reduced to “the universal equality of things” by excessive reproduction, no longer an object of veneration. In Benjamin's words, “for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.” (Benjamin, 217-252)

But did photography really, once for all, replace paintings with its ability to “reproduce” reality truthfully and effortlessly, therefore allow art to be appreciated without the cult of the original? A look at its history will prove otherwise. Early photographers, thrilled by the novelty of the media, often tried to manipulate the shooting and developing process. The Pictorialist school, in vogue from late 19th to the early 20th century, exemplified such a trend. By using soft focus, special filters, sophisticated dark room and printing techniques, the Pictorialists attempted to imitate paintings and etchings with the camera, and to elevate photography to the status of “fine arts”. Even the early portraits, with no intention of becoming art, were routinely “touched up” by the photographers to achieve intended results. The European modernist, Man Ray, Lászlò Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky in particular, finally severed photography from paintings and redefined it as an art that dealt with light, but they were still much more interested in creating a surrealist and immaterial “reality” than capturing a reality that already existed. The mechanical, super-realist nature of the media, as described by Benjamin, began to be acknowledged only when the aesthetics of “straight photography” came into being in the early 1920s. Launched by artists such as Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand and Ansel Adams, “straight photography” first grew prominent in America, and then spread to Europe, by

documentary-style photographers like Eugène Atget and Henri Cartier-Bresson.⁷⁰ Those artists produced works that were sharply focused, plainly mounted, and “without tricks of process or manipulation”; what they pursued was “an absolute unqualified objectivity”, which they believed to be the “very essence of photography”. Their works, however, are still unquestionably artistic, with their supreme expressiveness, achieved by the artist’s sensitivity and respect for the things in front of him, as well as by his ability to capture the chiaroscuro of the subject matter “through a range of almost infinite tonal values which lies beyond the skill of the human hand.” (Straud, 524-26) This straightness was pushed even further after the Second World War, by artists such as Walker Evans, Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander, who advocated “absolute fidelity to the medium itself”, including natural lighting, frontal view, correct framing and “unobtrusive technical mastery” (Evans, 169-70).

The pursuit for straightness in art photography was largely motivated by its interaction—and rivalry—with the increasingly prevalent “news and documentary” photography. Prompted by technical renovations in camera portability, artificial lighting and printing materials, a great number of “picture” magazines and newspapers came out between 1920 and 1940, flooding the American urban landscape with oversized photographs. With no need to appear artistic, those generically produced photographs claim to be “a mechanical analogue of reality”; the analogue, however, is never truly “mechanical” or objective. Colors are eliminated or modified, scales are reduced or

⁷⁰ It needs to be pointed out that the European documentary photographers at the time did not share the same purist aesthetics with the American “straight” photographers. While the Americans believed that “the meaning of the subject matter in a photograph was self-evident”, the Europeans thought that “photographic meaning is always a matter of subjective cultural context.” See Hulick, 55.

magnified, some details are highlighted while others understated, and more importantly, the *context* of seeing a photograph—whether it is displayed in a gallery or printed on a newspaper—is completely different from that of seeing with naked eyes. As Roland Barthes points out, the press photograph is “an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms;” and, interacting with the semiotic structure of the titles, captions and articles attached, it is “not only perceived, received, it is *read*, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs.” A photograph, therefore, always delivers a message, a coded message that nevertheless “develops on the basis of a message without a code.” In other words, the signifying power of the message comes precisely from its deceptive “objectivity”, “the perfection and plenitude of its analogy”, its ability to have ideological prejudices without appearing biased (Barthes, 15-31). While the first generation of “straight photographers” still clung to the codeless illusion and attempted to produce images that were more “objective” than the popular news press, their followers soon became more aware of the political connotations of their own works. In a world where human perceptions of the world are increasingly shaped through the lens of cameras, artists like Arbus use their art to reveal an alternative “reality”, bleak, alienated, hard to decipher and almost “surreal”. They compel the viewers to not only rethink the reality defined by the mainstream media, but also to reassess photographs' ability to “document” the reality.

Not surprisingly, the documenting power of the camera was thoroughly discredited by the next generation of photographers—the group that is often labeled as

postmodern or conceptual. Beginning from the early 1970s, photo prints again became “self-consciously manipulated”, by technologies such as Kwik Print, photolithography and color Xerox; influenced by conceptual art as well as by the “snapshot aesthetics”, photographic images were also frequently used together with texts to form “part of a narrative.” (Hulick, 181-3) Such trend became dominant in the 1980s, when photography was “no longer trusted for its presumed objectivity and transparency, no longer the reliable guide to visual truth.” The artists realized that the realism of “straight” photography was limited and deceptive, since “representation is not merely the imitation of nature, but includes *who and what are being represented, and by whom, for what purposes (conscious or unconscious), and with what effect on which viewers.*” In other words, a truthful representation demands an explicit description of its own context and perspective. Only through this self-exposure could the artists “force the viewer away from aesthetic contemplation and towards an understanding, or at least an awareness, of a message.” (Jussim, 3-13. Italics from the original text) Instead of trying to be objective, now the photographers construct and “stage” their images openly; instead of understating the connotative aspect of the photograph, now they overplay it, make it detectable, and therefore disputable.

The postmodern turn in photography also points to the fact that, despite Benjamin's observations, the aura of the original still exists in the world of mechanical reproductions. Displayed in the right context, a photograph possesses the same haloed status as a more conventional art piece does, especially after photography, as a media,

was officially admitted to academic institutions and the mainstream art market.⁷¹ As Douglas Crimp puts it, “the withering of aura is an inevitable fact of our time, then equally inevitable are all those projects to recuperate it, to pretend that the original and the unique are still possible and desirable.” The postmodern photographers, on the other hand, try to do the opposite: while pretending to “recuperate” the aura, they in fact deplete and displace it, so as to show that “it too is now only an aspect of the copy, not the original.” (Crimp, 1980, 94) The works of Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman may illustrate such deconstructions of the original. By re-photographing old masterpieces and claiming them as her own, Levine pushes the duplicating power of photography to its own mockery, and once more reminds the viewers that the “original” can never be firmly located in the world of photography, nor in the world of art at large: Edward Weston's striking photos of the nudes, from which Levine copies directly, in fact also model after the classical sculptures. Sherman's “film stills” of herself in a number of stereotypical female roles in Hollywood films, on the other hand, shows not only that the “art photography” may copy directly from the popular culture, but also that the individual behind artworks—the creative, expressive artist as defined by modernism—may itself be imaginary, constructed, and not at all original.

Levine and Sherman's works also reflect the peculiar role photography plays in the postmodern age, as “an uneasy amalgam of high modernism and popular culture.”

71 The period from 1960 to 1980 is generally seen as the time when photography, as well as other “mass media”, became institutionalized in universities and museums in the United States and Europe. The Society of Photographic Education was formed in 1962. The first photography historian was appointed as a full-time university faculty in 1963. In 1968, the National Endowment for the Arts was granted to a photographer for the first time. The Association of International Photography Art Dealers was formed in 1979, after a sharp rise of demand in the late 1970s.

(Newman, 183) Intended as a description for postmodernism in general, Newman's words are the most accurate when applied on the media of photography, through which every piece of "high art" may be reproduced and popularized, and in which many products of popular culture, such as fashion photographs, may become a specimen of fine art. Levine's unabashed appropriations, as the art critic Linda Andre has commented, in fact address an elite audience, the ones with enough knowledge and sophistication to identify the resources of her copying and to understand the subtlety of her intentions, while more naïve viewers may take her works as simple documentary of the "reality" (Andre, 25). Her art, therefore, at once ridicules and repeats the way high modernism creates its aura through building an exclusive readership. On the other hand, Sherman's "self-portraits" submerge the individuality of the artist under the female identity portrayed by popular culture—an identity that is at once fraught and fragmented, narcissistic and impersonal. Her simulacra of those stereotypical images may have called attention to the materialization of women in pop culture, but it has also paid homage to the iconography of this culture, and has once more challenged the division between popular culture and "fine arts".

Levine and Sherman, as well as many other postmodern photographers, actively engage themselves with the "unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced *precisely in order to denounce it.*" (Guimond, 598) Their works reflect on the estranged heritage of modernism, the consuming power of popular culture, and the role of photography itself as a media of mechanical reproduction. Their works provide inspirations and paradigms for Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi, the two Chinese

artists I will discuss in the following. Again, before analyzing their individual works, I will first review the brief history of experimental photography in China, in which their works may be situated.

“From Zero to Infinity”: Photography in Contemporary China

Although photography has been widely used for journalism, advertising and personal portraits in China since the middle of the 19th century, it did not fully develop into an art form until much more recently.⁷² Only a small number of institutionally trained photographers had access to cameras during the revolution era, and most of the images they produced for publication were celebratory scenes that testified the achievements of present day society or rosy-cheeked portraits of Mao, routinely “touched up” but regarded as realistic. In fact, the photographs at that time followed the same compositional formula of Revolutionary Realism as the paintings did; and, due to the lack of equipment, “amateur” and uncensored works barely existed—even personal and family portraits had to be taken in the state-owned photo studios. The mass mourning of Zhou Enlai in April 5, 1976 in Beijing prompted the first rise of unofficial photography in China, during which scenes of protests were captured by a few amateur photographers and circulated underground. Those forbidden images, however, were published and

⁷² The first photographic portrait studio appeared in Hong Kong by 1846, operated by western photographers, and by the 1870s, studios operated by Chinese photographers had become commonplace in the port cities. However, the use of photography stayed largely commercial in China. Serious discussions on the media didn't come into being until the 1920s, when *Sheying Zhinan* (*A Guide to Photography*, 1923) and *Sheying zazhi* (*Photography Journal*, 1922) were first published, followed by a number of similar books and journals. But most of these publications focus on the teaching of techniques. Even the occasional discussions on the aesthetic and moral aspects of photography, such as those on soft-focus pictures and images of nude models, were halted when the Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937, and never came back during the following four decades of revolution. See Ma, 4-28.

celebrated when the Gang of Four was condemned in 1978, under the title *The People's Mourning* (*Renmin de daonian*) and “dedicated” to the new Party Chairman Hua Guofeng.⁷³ The first exhibition of unofficial photographs, entitled *Ziran, Shehui, Ren* [*Nature, Society and Man*], was held in Beijing on April 1, 1979; it was organized by the newly formed April Photography Society, the leading members of which were the April Fifth (*siwu*) heroes. The works exhibited were largely intimate, slightly sentimental portrayals of natural sceneries and human emotions (Fig. 24), but were still perceived as



Figure 24 Jin Bohong, *The Echoing Wall*, black-and-white photograph, a work in the first *Nature, Society and Man* exhibition, 1979.

powerful, even radical, by an audience used to the cheerful, masculine images of revolution. Compared with the politically charged “Star exhibition” around the same time, *Ziran, shehui, ren* also drew a great number of visitors but little censorship, and the

⁷³ Including over 500 images from the “April Fifth” event, *Renmin de daonian* was published by the Beijing Publishing House (*Beijing chuban she*) in January 1979.

same group of artists held exhibitions with the same title for two more times, the last of which was even admitted into the National Art Gallery. Their “art photography”, however, soon began to lose its provocative edge and became “pretentious, stylized salon styles” that fit well into the newly-emerged visual culture (Wu and Phillips, 16).

The April Photo Society dissolved after 1981, partly due to the fact that the styles of its members were becoming too divergent to stay in one group, but their exhibitions, traveling nationwide, triggered experiments among amateur photographers in many cities. Like the other fields of contemporary art in China, photography went through a “New Wave Movement” during the 1980s. Numerous groups and exhibitions sprung up all over the country, and the practitioners quickly became familiar with every style of photography ever appeared in the West since the turn of the century, from Alfred Stieglitz to Cindy Sherman. Dozens of journals and magazines were published, filled with reproduced images of all western schools as well as historical and theoretical discussions of the media. By the end of the 1980s, photography, as an art, had grown from virtually nonexistent to “having basically caught up with the rest of the world.” (Wu and Phillips, 18) But curiously, while the rest of the “avant-garde” art were busy escaping from realism, the New Wave photography witnessed a “documentary turn” by the second half of the decade, with *xiangtu* (native soil) and *shanghen* (scar) styles dominating the scene. The former focused on the representations of ordinary people and indigenous cultures, especially the ethnic minorities in China; the latter documented “scared” human beings, including victims from the Cultural Revolution and marginalized groups in society, such as beggars and mental patients (Fig. 25). Both styles were present in other cultural fields

as well, especially in the field of literature, where *Shanghen wenxue* [Scar Literature] and *Xungen wenxue* [Root-Searching Literature] were the mainstream for several years, but



Figure 25 Wu Jun, *Shangfang zhe—People Pleading for Justice from the Higher Authorities*, 1977, color photograph.

the prominence these two schools in photography apparently had to do with the camera's unique ability to capture reality—a reality that had been previously ignored or distorted in the official media. However, those “alternative realisms” tended to be quickly

“legitimized” and absorbed by the official culture. The April Fifth images, as mentioned earlier, were used by the new generation of party leaders to establish their legitimacy; the “native soil” helped to create the myth of a pan-China nationalism, in which the minority cultures were portrayed as an integrated yet “forgotten” past; and the sentimental humanism in the “scar” photographs was adopted by the mainstream photo-journalism as mild criticisms of the now condemned history. In other words, while trying to make more “objective” images, the new documentary photographers paid little attention to the connotative and contextual complexity of their pictures, and ended up producing images that were susceptible to various ideological interpretations.

This New Wave photography, like the rest of the New Wave movement, came to an abrupt stop in 1989. When the media reemerged in the contemporary art scene in the 1990s, it was practiced by a different group of artists, most of whom started their careers as painters, printmakers or cinematographers. Those artists first used the camera, by then having become affordable and popular in China, to record their own artworks and performances, as official exhibitions or publications were prohibited or unavailable at the time. This peculiar function of photography marked the turning point of the media, upon which it changed from a portrayal of the “naked reality” to a documentation of the manipulated and performed “reality”. As Wu Hong argued, the three “landmark events” in experimental photography at the turn of the 1990s were: the organization of three “Document Exhibitions” (*wenxian zhan*), composed of photographic reproductions of recent artworks that couldn't be shown otherwise; the photographs of the bohemian East Village (*dongcun*) performance artists, taken by the fellow artist Rong Rong; the

publication of a new type of unofficial art journals such as *The Book with a Black Cover* (*Heipi shu*), which introduced the new group of experimental artists to the world and, for the first time, declared photography as “the most important medium of experimental art.” (Wu and Phillips, 22) At this point, many artists had already started to work with photography extensively, and the dominating concern in the field had also shifted from the capturing of “reality” as it is to the expression of ideas, experimentation on the media itself, and explorations on the borderline between fiction and truth. In other words, photography also became as “conceptual” (*guannianhua*) as the rest of contemporary Chinese art.⁷⁴ Like their western predecessors in the 1980s, the Chinese artists no longer trusted the camera’s “presumed objectivity and transparency”; instead, they used strategies such as collage, appropriation and digital processing to reveal the fictional aspects of photographic images. But comparing with the majority of conceptual photography in the West, the Chinese artists are less interested in the abstract illustration of ideas or subtle interplays between words and images, and are more focused on presenting “narrative dramas”, on “the depiction of time changes in the camera’s fictional moment.”⁷⁵ (Robins, 213) As the works discussed in the following sections will demonstrate, the artists are still telling stories with the camera, only now the stories are

74 One of the first statements on the “conceptual turn” in photography appeared in 1997, on the third issue of *New Photo* (*Xin shying*), on which the editor Liu Zheng and Rong Rong remarked: “When CONCEPT enters Chinese photography, it is as if a window suddenly opens in a room that has been sealed for years.” Late in the same year, the first exhibition of conceptual photography in China, “New Photographic Image” (*Xin yingxiang*), was held in Beijing by the Saturday Photo Salon (*Xingqiliu sheying shalong*), prompting more theoretical discussion on the subject.

75 Robins’ definition was used by Wu Hong to describe the conceptual photography of China. See Wu and Phillip, 25.

clearly fictions—scripted, staged and performed, serving as simulacrum as well as mockery of the so-called “reality”.

The changes in photography during the 1990s were brought by a number of factors. First of all, participation in the international art world enabled the Chinese artists to “catch up” with contemporary photography in the West, in which documentary-style photographs have long been replaced by postmodern appropriations. After the mid 1990s, the new generation of experimental photographers also has joined the international market, in which they could sell their previously un-publishable works at skyrocketing prices: up to date, the highest priced work of experimental photograph is Zhang Huan’s *Family Album (Jiapu)*, sold at a Sotheby auction in 2006 for 168,000 USD; works of other well-known artists such as Hong Lei and Li Xiaojing also fetched more than 16,000 HKD in 2006, almost ten times higher than two years ago. The market economy in China allows the artist to acquire the latest computer and digital technologies, with which they may manipulate images with greater dexterity. All those outside stimuli, however, should not undermine the importance of the artists’ own political as well as aesthetic orientation towards conceptualization: their increasing awareness of the role photography has played in ideological discourses, and their effort to redefine the media in the present-day China. As I argued in the first chapter, popular culture has taken over the cultural field at an unprecedented level after 1992, and photography, undoubtedly the most powerful media in the popular visual culture, began to dominate the urban landscape. The prevalence of photographic images was already ubiquitous in the early 1990s, but with the popularity of computers and digital cameras in the twenty-first century, China, like the rest of the

world, is entering a “picture-reading age.” (*dutu shidai*) The contemporary Chinese society is utterly flooded with images of mechanical reproductions, from billboard advertisements to the internet, from cell phone snapshots to fashion magazines. People are used to seeing the world through the lens of the camera, while the naked, unprocessed reality is fast disappearing from the popular consciousness; the “coded” messages of photographic images, consequently, have also become more powerful and harder to detect than ever. The artists’ tasks to lay bare and to “decode” such messages, consequently, also become more difficult and intriguing.

Photographic image, being at once immediately comprehensible, easily duplicable and infinitely malleable, is the place where political propaganda, commercialism and personal expressions contest with each other with the utmost intensity. Photographic and video products, especially those produced for mass consumptions, are still rigorously censored by the government in China. On the other hand, experimental photography, like other types of “avant-garde art”, still has an extremely limited domestic audience. This is, of course, the case all over the world, but in China the situation is even worse, as there are still very few public museums that regularly feature experimental photography, and barely any public funds or private donations supporting the production of this art. While postmodern photography in the West proclaims itself as “an uneasy amalgam of high culture of pop culture”, the Chinese photographers have an even trickier situation to deal with, an even more difficult time finding their own way between the government-sponsored “high art” (including political art) and the powerful yet still premature pop culture. The dilemma, once again, has become the source for artistic creativity. The two

artists I am going to examine in the following, Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi, have each produced a simulacrum of a visual paradigm. Like the postmodern photographers in the West, they are “participating in the very activity that is being denounced”, but their works have done more than denouncing the activity they are participating: they have shed new lights on the paradigms they reproduced, and have revealed new conceptual complexities in the process of photographic reproduction.

Hong Hao: Reproduction Integrated with Renovation

Hong Hao graduated from the print-making department in the Central Art Academy in 1989; like Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie, he seemed to become intrigued by the deceptive power of “mechanical reproduction” from the very beginning. His graduation project was a silkscreen print entitled *Modern Revolutionary Model Plays (Geming xiandai yangbanxi)*, in which he drew scenes from the eight “model plays”—standard propaganda Peking opera pieces produced in the Cultural Revolution era—screen-printed them and bounded them into a book that looked like a relic piece from the period. His first well-known work, *Selected Scriptures (Cangjing)*, is made of a series of silkscreen prints that formed a “pseudo-encyclopedia”, including texts, maps, traditional paintings and illustrations. The book uses multiple languages and symbols, with no coherent structure to speak of, and most of its contents were imaginary or outright fabricated. The

“world maps” in *Selected Scriptures*, for example, have their topography rearranged by

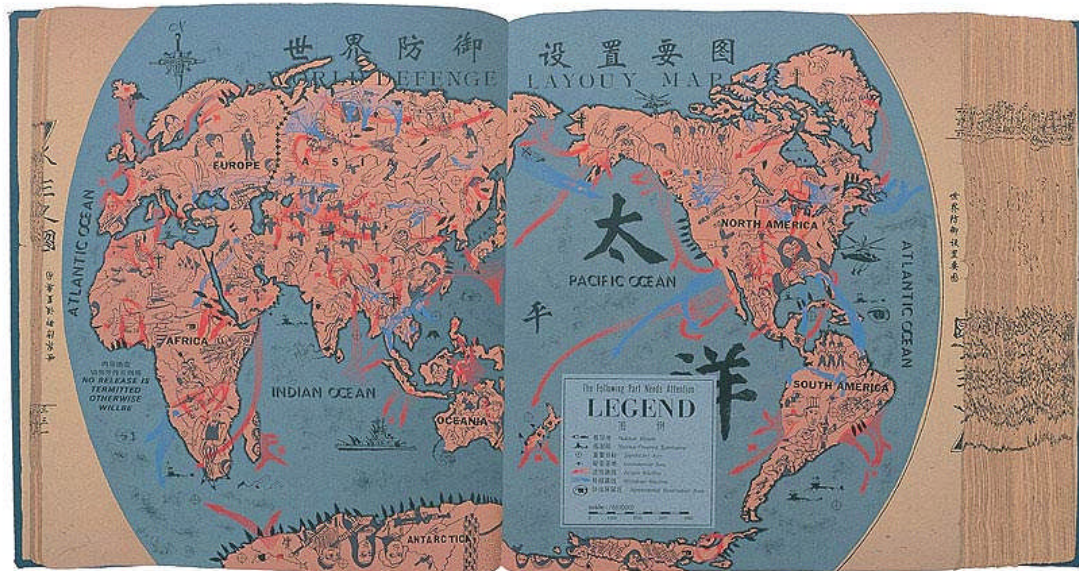


Figure 26 Hong Hao, *Selected Scriptures*, page 331, *The Strategic Defense of the World*, 1995. Silkscreen print 54 x 78 cm.

criteria such as military power or economic productivity, and their surfaces layered with obviously irrelevant texts, cartoons, logos and symbols (Fig. 26). Those “encyclopedia fictions”, however, look sophisticated and perfectly real on the first sight, especially since they are displayed as center pages in “a large, old Chinese book” (Mills and Li, 38). Clearly, this appearance of authenticity is created by the deliberately chosen context and reinforced by the viewers' own preconceptions.

Hong started to practice photography in his college years, and photography gradually becomes the media he prefers to use.⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, he also uses the camera to explore the subtle lines between authenticity and “fakes”, between the original and its reproductions. His photographic “copies” of *Riverside Scene during the Qingming Festival* (*Qingming shanghe tu*), completed between 1999 and 2002, is an ambitious undertaking on this subject.

Qingming shanghe tu is among the most studied paintings in the history of Chinese art. Stretching for 5.28 meters, this monumental scroll presents a panoramic view of the entire urban space of the Northern Song capital Kaifeng, with 648 human figures engaged in a great variety of activities, 122 houses, stretches of city walls, bridges and natural landscapes including the river itself. Generally seen as a masterpiece of realism and a paradigm of “painting on folkloric themes” (*fengsu hua*), it was frequently used by historians as a fine document of the urban-planning, architecture and customs, at a time of premodern urban prosperity, but many basic questions involving the authorship, background and aesthetic nature of the painting itself remained unsolved until very recently.⁷⁷ The painting is conventionally attributed to the Northern Song painter and literati Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145), but very little is known about its true provenance; and during its nearly one millennium of history, it was repeatedly “rediscovered” and

76 See “Interview of Hong Hao by Zhang Chaohui”, October 30, 2003, at Hong Hao's studio in Beijing. Hong says he began to feel bored by the monotonous process of printmaking around mid-1990s, and started to further explore the interest he had in photography from his college years.

77 Roderick Whitfield, “*Qingming shanghe tu* de chuancheng” [The *Qingming shanghe tu* tradition], a paper presented on the International Conference on *Qingming shanghe tu* and Song Dynasty Genre Paintings, Beijing, Oct. 10-12, 2005. Whitfield, a scholar from the Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, is the first one who completed a PhD dissertation on *Qingming shanghe tu* in English.

acquired by different imperial courts, private owners and institutions, making the authenticity of the painting even harder to identify.⁷⁸ More than forty copies of the painting survived to today; some were commissioned by emperors, some were executed by such prestigious artists—the Ming master Qiu Ying (1482-1559), for example—that they were taken as the “original” for later copies. Most interestingly, unlike many other ancient masterpieces, *Qingming shanghe tu* is still ardently “reproduced” and admired by artists, craftsmen and the general populace today, to a degree that borders on a “Qingming fever”. Aside from copies in color and ink, those modern reproductions are also executed in oil on canvas, paper-cut, wood carving, embroidery and a “true-scale” black granite bas-relief; it was even, uncannily, adapted into a dancing show and a symphonic piece. Most recent tributes to the painting include a grand “Qingming Shanghe Theme Park” opened in the city of Kaifeng in 2004, and an eight-episode

⁷⁸ There were four of such claimed rediscoveries recorded in history, before the painting was discovered and acquired again by the Forbidden City Museum in 1950. Since 14th century, forgeries were frequently passed off as the original, as the real original was repeatedly stolen or “missing” from the imperial collection and—supposedly—taken over by wealthy families. Even today, there are rumors that the original has been damaged during the Cultural Revolution era, and the piece now kept in the Forbidden City Museum is incomplete or forged. See Yang Xin, 40-45.

documentary *Qingming shanghe tu*, aired by the China Central Television in 2006 as a

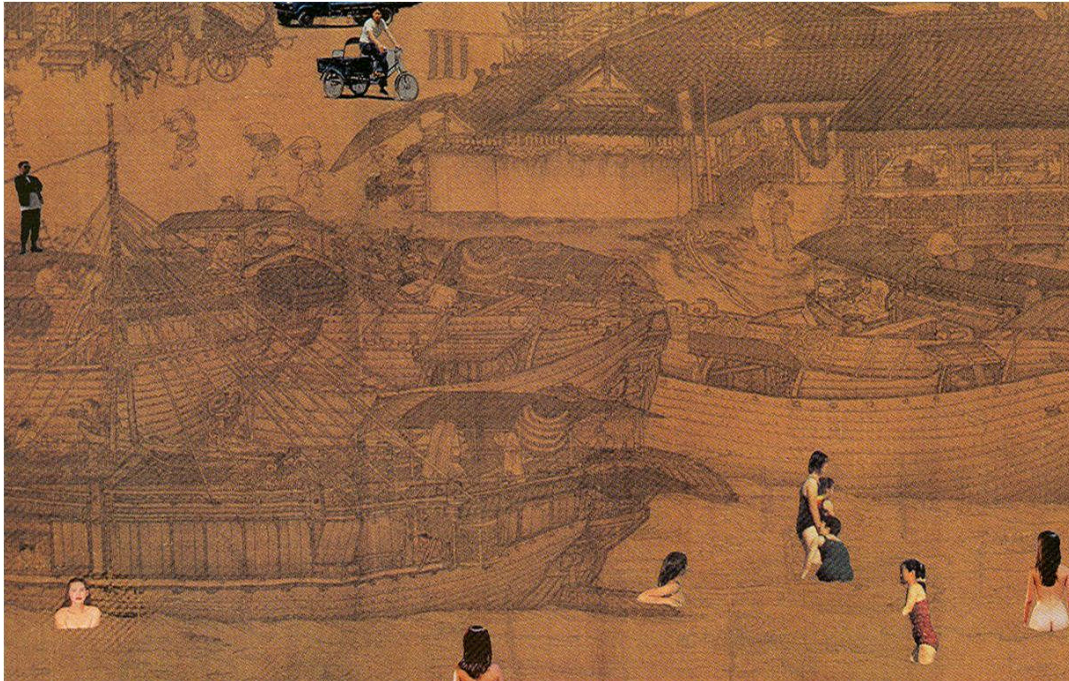


Figure 27

Hong Hao, *Qingming shanghe tu No. 2* (details) 2000. Chromogenic print with collage.

part of the “History and Culture” series (*Lishi wenhua xiliepian*). Clearly, both commercial and political interests contribute to the unusual popularity of *Qingming shanghe tu*, making it at once iconic and vulgar, laden with symbolic meanings while depleted as an “original” art piece.

Hong Hao's photographic reproductions of *Qingming shanghe tu* series, on the other hand, provide a much-needed mockery of the *Qingming* fever (Fig. 27). With pictures of modern human figures—some photographed by himself, some cut out from pictorials, fashion magazines and pornography—plugged in a digital reproduction of the original painting, all in obtrusively bright colors, some in nudity, the work provokes laughter as well as discomfort among its viewers. Using the techniques of photo collage, Hong's work directly points to the paradox between the true and the false, the “high” and “low”, and to “a nonlinear view of time where fragments of the past become the present.” (Hoffman, 87) The scraped photographs, set against the faded, monochromatic background of the painting, strike one as both “real” and absurd: real by themselves, while absurd in the context. The viewers are compelled to realize that the work in fact reflects the real cityscape in the ancient capital of China today, where the ruins of the old coexists with the surge of the new, and where the elegance of tradition converges with the chaos of modern life. This peculiar mixture is often awkward, sometimes ridiculous, and occasionally fascinating. As Meg Maggio, a curator of the Courtyard Gallery in Beijing, claims, Hong's *Qingming shanghe tu* “is a jumble of images which relay the confused and frenetic atmosphere of the new Chinese capital as it springs forward at a break-neck

pace toward the ever-elusive goal of ‘modernity’.” (Maggio, 2) If we look closer at the picture, we can see that the figures are strategically photographed and arranged. Many of them easily blend in the activities the characters in the original painting were engaged in, such as crowding around the storytellers, hackling with vendors and prostitutes on the streets, or drinking in small shops with open doors—scenes one can still see in many cities in China today. The modern figures also move in the painted space with rhythm and ease, illustrating the compositional structure instead of disturbing it. In fact, after having overcome the initial shock, the viewer may start to feel the harmony between the modern figures and their ancient surroundings.

Such integration of the past and the future, however, also has its origin in the Chinese tradition of copying paintings—the type of *moben* that replaces the original with more contemporary and “fashionable” costumes, designs, decorations as well as stylistic preferences. Started as early as the Royal Painting Academy in the Song dynasty, to “make a copy with differences” was a “standard practice in Chinese art: a painter could call such copy his work, because “it ‘updated’ the ancient masterpieces and reflected his own ideas and tastes.” (Wu Hong, 1996, 48) The Qiu Ying *moben* and the Qianlong *moben* (completed around 1736) of *Qingming shanghe tu*, the two best known copies of Zhang Zeduan's original, both belong to that category. Qiu's copy uses the “green-and-blue” (*qinglu*) color scheme that characterizes the Ming dynasty “Wu School”, to which he belonged; it is also twice as long as Zhang's original, with more than a thousand human figures present. The Qianlong copy, which is completed through the collaboration of five court painters, has a more naturalistic color scheme, adds many street activities

that are peculiar to the Qing dynasty to the picture, and even adopts the “linear perspective” the court painters newly learned from the Italian missionary and artist Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688-1766), who took his residence in the Chinese imperial court since 1715. Apparently, in this type of “copying”, to recall the “spirit” (*shen*) of the original was no longer the primary concern; instead, these artists merely “borrowed” the admired composition of the old piece to display modern contents, and consequently, to show that the theme of the older painting is still relevant in the present age. This is especially true in the case of *Qingming shanghe tu*, which depicts the urban prosperity under “wise governance” (*qingming*) in a most remarkable totality.⁷⁹ The copiers, by depicting the same scene in a more contemporary setting, showed that such prosperity was still the case under the present monarchy. In this sense, Hong Hao's photographic reproduction of *Qingming shanghe tu* merely continues the tradition of “updating” the ancient format with modern contents—the Chinese way of creating new images through “the manipulation of preexisting conventions and schema.” (Poggi, xiil.)

⁷⁹ Although清明 is conventionally translated as *Qingming* Festival, a traditional holiday in the early spring, recent scholarship shows that many scenes in the painting, such as vendors selling watermelons, indicates summer instead of spring. The *qingming* in the title, therefore, is more likely to refer to “wise governance”, which is the same word in Chinese.



Figure 28 Hong Lei, *Fang song Li Anzhong "Qiuju Anchun Tu" [After the Song Dynasty Li Anzhong "Autumn Chrysanthemum and Quail,"]*, Chromogenic prints, 1998

Hong Hao is not the only contemporary artist who adapts this tradition into the media of photography. In fact, such experiments were explored by a number of artists even before Hong's *Qingming shanghe tu* came into existence. Hong Lei (born.1960)'s photographic "copies" of the Song court paintings (Fig. 28) and Wang Qingsong (born. 1966)'s photographic reproduction of the 10th century masterpiece *Han xizai yeyan tu* [*The Night Revel of Han Xizai*], were only two of the most prominent examples. While Hong Lei's work dramatizes the violent death of tradition, symbolized in the bloody transformation the "flowers and birds paintings" (*Huaniao hua*) that characterized the art of leisure, Wang uses actors in modern and gaudy costumes to re-stage the old painting, which portrays a private party of decadence and debauchery hosted by the aristocratic

Han Xizai, and therefore mocks the continuation of such “tradition” among the present-day bureaucracy. Both their works have a more immediate visual impact and a stronger sense of irony than *Qingming shanghe tu*, but Hong’s work, being subtle, seems to reveal more complicated tensions between the modern and the traditional.

Hong Hao also seems to be more intrigued by the original painting itself, as well as by the range of possibilities in “reproducing” it, which he explores in the rest of the same photo series. In *No. 3*, he tries to use digital images to illustrate the compositional structure of the painting abstractly. The pictorial plane is first divided into four parts that proportionately correspond to the four sections of the painting; the ambiance of each section is also represented by different color and texture, which seems to progress or recede on the flat surface. (Fig. 29) For *No. 4* and *No. 5* he divides the painting into even



Figure 29 Hong Hao, *Qingming shanghe tu No. 3*. 2000. Digital photograph.



Figure 30 Hong Hao, *Qingming shanghe tu No. 5.*, 2000. digital photograph.



Figure 31 Hong Hao, *Qingming shanghe tu No. 7.* 2000. Digital photograph.

smaller frames, photographs scenes in the modern day Beijing that resemble the compositional structure of each frame, and patches them together to create a scroll (Fig. 30). For *No. 7*, he drove through Beijing in the same path that Zhang Zeduan supposedly portrayed, with a camera installed in his car that took photographs every a few minutes automatically, and patches the scenes from the painting side by side with the photographs to form another scroll, bringing the past and the present to their sharpest and most “objective” contrast (Fig. 31). The dramatic changes the cityscape has gone through are presented plainly in those “reproductions”: the presence of nature, which possesses more than half of space in the original painting as well as in its numerous copies, is largely replaced by soaring skyscrapers, either completed or under construction; the river itself is no more than a glimpse, covered by freeways and the high bridges above; the streets are still crowded with people, but most of them are merely passing through in a hurry. In fact, the only things that mark the scenes as Beijing—instead of any other modern city in China—are the ancient gates; some are in ruin or look deserted, while others, such as the Tiananmen Gate, are refurbished and decorated with modern icons.⁸⁰ Clearly, Hong Hao's copies do not share the celebratory tone with the previous copies, traditional or modern; in a way, it has returned to Zhang Zeduan's original. In recent years, many scholars have argued that *Qingming shanghe tu* contains a number of scenes that indicates poverty and social injustice, and Zhang Zeduan, employing visual techniques, deliberately directs the viewers' gazes towards such scenes. The painting, therefore, has a subtle but

80 Following the tradition of the previous “copiers”, Hong Hao's work ignores the fact that the city he captures is no longer the city originally portrayed by Zhang Zeduan. This “falsehood”, however, is partially due to the utter destruction of the ancient urban-scape in Kaifeng, and the fact that the urban planning of Beijing takes after the model set up by Kaifeng in many ways.

unambiguous ironic edge (Murck, 196-7). This irony, however, tends to be suppressed by the official interpretations of the painting in China and disregarded by the subsequent copiers; Hong's copies, on the other hand, hides social criticism under the portrayal of apparent prosperity.

The most striking difference between Zhang Zeduan's original and Hong Hao's reproductions, however, comes from the different modes of representation in traditional Chinese painting and photography: while the space in the painting looks continuous and naturalistic, the photographic scrolls, though more realistic in details, could only produce a broken montage. This simple fact compels the viewers to rethink the pictorial representation of space. We tend to believe that the linear, one-point perspective, as discovered by the Renaissance artists and “proved correct” by the modern invention of photography, reproduces what we see the most realistically, but this perspective only works when one looks at a single frame, from a fixed distance. In contrast, a traditional Chinese painting, the handscroll in particular, often has many objects in view on an extended pictorial plane, and cannot be “taken in” by one fixed gaze. Based on the measured perspective used in topographical drawings, *Qingming shanghe tu* is one of the earliest paintings known today which use the “multiple elevated viewpoints” with remarkable success. Nowhere in this monumental work conforms to the linear single perspective, yet each and every part is depicted in great details, flows on seamlessly in continuation, and all of the scenes are “combined without causing any distortion or any singularity to arrest the eye.” (Watson, 57) In fact, handscrolls like *Qingming shanghe tu* resemble the cinema more than any other media: they look the most convincing while

being unfolded, and therefore being set in motion and viewed frame by frame. Clearly, the “reality” represented by photography is limited to one point of view, and is inherently fragmented; when it comes to the depiction a “total view” of a grand space—the view we can acquire when walking through it—it no longer provides the illusion of reality. The handscroll, on the other hand, often offers the most vivid and intimate experiences of space, extended through time.



Figure 32 Hong Hao, *Mr. Hong, Please Come In*, 1998. Chromogenic print.

Hong Hao's ambiguous view towards the photographic reality is more distinctly revealed in his *Mr. Gnoh* (1997-2000) and *Mr. Hong* (1998) series. Both are self-portraits, but the “self” portrayed plays between truthfulness and fictionality. In the former, he first holds a mirror, in which the image of himself is transformed to a “westerner”, with blond

hair and blue eyes, and then poses as a westernized young man, talking on cell phones and driving cars, further illustrating the mirrored self-image. The title “Gnoh” is also a reversed word-play of “Hong”. In the latter, he wears traditional Chinese garments, yet surrounds himself with items that suggest western “taste” and luxuries. The title he imprints on those images, such as the above “Mr. Hong, Please Come In”, suggests the lure as well as suspicion he feels about such life (fig. 32). Those image, as Sheldon Lu argues, are “both real and false reflections of the schizophrenic, fragmented self“, caught in the middle of rapid changes and unfulfilled desires (Lu, 2007, 153). They also reflect a reality peculiar to the Chinese artists including Hong Hao himself—the embarrassing fact that they are irreversibly westernized in their artistic as well as intellectual upbringings, and, largely owing to the western market, they are joining the “new rich” in China, in the manner that is largely defined by the popular culture. In other words, just like the fictional space of the cityscape in the original *Qingming shanghe tu* represents the cityscape more “realistically” than the “photographic scrolls” ever managed, those portraits, though staged and fictional, reveal the “true selves” of the artists better than any straight photographs ever could.

Zhao Bandi: The Ultimate Simulacrum

Hong Hao's *Mr. Hong* series also proposes a question that is vital to all contemporary photographers: without the aura of originality, what differentiates an artist from a mere cameraman, and what makes a photograph stand out as a piece of art among the increasingly well-crafted products of the popular visual culture? Does the institutional

context—the fact that the work is seen in a museum—alone make it art, as Duchamp has suggested? What if *Mr. Hong* is put in a fashion magazine? Will it look “artsy” and out of place, or will it be no different from the advertisements it simulates? Is it the aesthetic nature of the image that distinguishes itself, or the fact that it was produced and “signed” by an artist? Does the “signature” of the artist alone—the recognition that the object in view is made or appropriated by an artist—enable the work to be appreciated as art by sophisticated viewers? How far, in a word, can an artist challenge the boundary between “art photography” and the popular visual culture?



Figure 33 Zhao Bandi, *Zhao Bandi & Panda (with Zhang Qianqian)*, 1996. Photo/C-print, 100 × 78 cm.

Zhao Bandi (born. 1966), another “conceptual photographer”, manages to push such boundary into the most precarious place. Graduating from the oil painting department in the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988, he started his career with paintings that were both sarcastic and lyrical, but despite the fact that those works were well received and sold well in auctions in the later years, he stopped painting altogether in the late 1990s and even denounced it as a “dead art”⁸¹. In 1997, he began to make his trademark photo series, which feature himself with a toy panda in a variety of situations. At first, the panda serves like a mere prop, adding a sense of fantasy and humor to the cliché images appropriated from commercial studio pictures or wedding photos. Zhao himself also plays apparently ridiculous roles in those pictures, often with ambiguous sexuality. Some of the those images are referred to as a reversal of the assigned gender roles in Chinese society, as well as a mockery of the one-child policy (Fig. 33). In later photographs, however, both the artist and the panda evolve into more “life-like” characters, and the pictures, while clearly staged, no longer have the strong theatricality of the earlier photos. The panda acts like the artist's child, lover and friend—or a life companion in general, with a voice of his own appearing as speech bubbles. Most of the photos send a clear message that is intended for “public benefits”, on issues ranging from personal safety and hygiene to unemployment and environmental problems (Fig. 34, 35). All of these issues,

81 On a speech Zhao Bandi gave on his visit to the Central Academy of Fine Arts on November 10, 2006 and later recorded on his personal blog. During his interview with Karen Smith, he also describes his separation from painting as an act of resolution—he threw away his brushes and paints, and never picked them again. See <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/500>



Figure 34 Zhao Bandi, *Zhao Bandi and the Panda: I am Laid Off*, 1999. Photo/C-Print.



Figure 35 Zhao Bandi, *Zhao Bandi & Panda: Safety is Everything*, 1999. Photo/C-Print.

as anyone living in China will be able to recognize, are prominent in modern Chinese society, and they receive plenty of attention from the mainstream media. Zhao's *Panda Series* immediately reminds one of the “public service announcements” (*gongyi guanggao*) in China, which are usually issued by the government, but his photographs do not have the didactic tone often assumed by those announcements. The messages are delivered with lighthearted, inoffensive humor; the panda, as an acknowledged symbol of China and adorned universally for its extreme rarity as well as cute clumsiness, adds a sense of playfulness and irony to all the images instantly. Of course, Zhao was not the only contemporary artist who used panda in his works. Xu Bing's *Panda Zoo* (multimedia installation. Jack Tilton Gallery, NY, Sep-Oct 1998), for example, features two “pandas” wandering in a typically “Chinese” setting of bamboo and landscape paintings; a closer look, however, reveals that the pandas were in fact two pigs painted and masked. But unlike Xu Bing's “fake panda”, Zhao Bandi's panda character seems a mere child-play, providing amusements without provoking much controversy.

Critics often argue that Zhao's *Panda Series* serves as a parody of the ideological contents of the “public service announcements”. The press release of Zhao's solo exhibition *Uh-oh! Pandaman* in Britain (Manchester City Art Gallery, June 27-September 4, 2004) opens with “(i)t isn't easy to get across a political message in China at the best of times, but somehow Zhao Bandi has managed to parody Chinese state propaganda thanks mainly to a toy panda.”⁸² The Shanghai Art Museum, the biggest institution in China that features contemporary artists, also argues that Zhao's art “appropriates, reverses and

⁸² See http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/arts/2004/06/25/zhao_bandi.shtml.

rejects the official message” by combining “the format of Communist propaganda with the glossy advertisements that are spreading so rapidly in China.”⁸³ What the critics have ignored, however, is that such a “combination” was already widespread in China before the *Panda Series* came into existence, as the government frequently employs the popular culture for its political agendas; also, as I will demonstrate in the following, Zhao's photographs are *not* perceived as parodies of the “state propaganda” by most of their domestic audiences—nor are they intended to be. In fact, the *Panda Series* stands out with its sincerity, its seemingly complete lack of condescension towards the paradigms it simulates. While most experimental artists put pop culture and revolutionary icons into strikingly ironic juxtapositions, or mix them up with provocative images of pornography and violence, the photographs of Zhao Bandi and his panda look entirely normal, crowd-friendly—even mediocre.

This apparent mediocrity is a result of deliberate and painstaking efforts of the artist. Zhao Bandi says that, after he gave up painting, he tried a series of experiments with other materials and forms, none of which seemed satisfactory. Determined to seek a wider audience than the self-congratulatory art community, he started to make a calendar—a “commercially successful visual product with mass audience”—in 1996, which included the images that had the panda as a prop (Fig. 33). Although Zhao invested heavily in the “marketing” of this project—he had the calendars sold at newspaper stands and bookstores across the city—it again failed to win a popular audience, largely due to the apparent “artiness” of the images. He made his first breakthrough in 1998, when he

⁸³ See www.shanghart.com/artists/zhaobandi/default.html.

discovered that the panda may act like his spokesperson, through whom he could “talk about culture in a soft, humorous way.”⁸⁴ This “soft, humorous” manner is formed by the active involvement of the panda, with all its cultural connotations, as a fellow actor, but it is also perfected by the artist's attention to details, his subtle manipulation of the performances, settings and photo editing, as well as his gentle wit and sharp observation of current events. The viewers cannot help but smile at the hooded anorak the unemployed worker wears in *I am Laid Off* (Fig. 34), the color-striped hat the driver has on in *Safety is Everything* (Fig. 35), or the toy hammer held by the panda in *Oppose Violence*, with “15KG” and the sprite logo printed on it (Fig. 36), all of which appear frequently in both real life and the skewed, cartoonized reflection of “real life” in popular culture. Some of the images may contain a subtle sense of irony, such as the fade-out, foggy background in *I am Laid Off*, as in contrast to the encouragement to “see farther” from the panda character, or the opening curtains in *Oppose Violence*, which could suggest that the officially-sponsored “*jian yi yong wei*” (literally “to act bravely when seeing injustice”) is no more than a stage play. Such irony, however, is so evasive that the viewer could skip them altogether comfortably, and see those pictures simply as well-made and adorable, with no visual depths or complexities.

84 Interview with Karen Smith on Jan. 2004. See <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/500>. The interview is also published on the catalogue *Uh-oh! Pandaman*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, 2004.

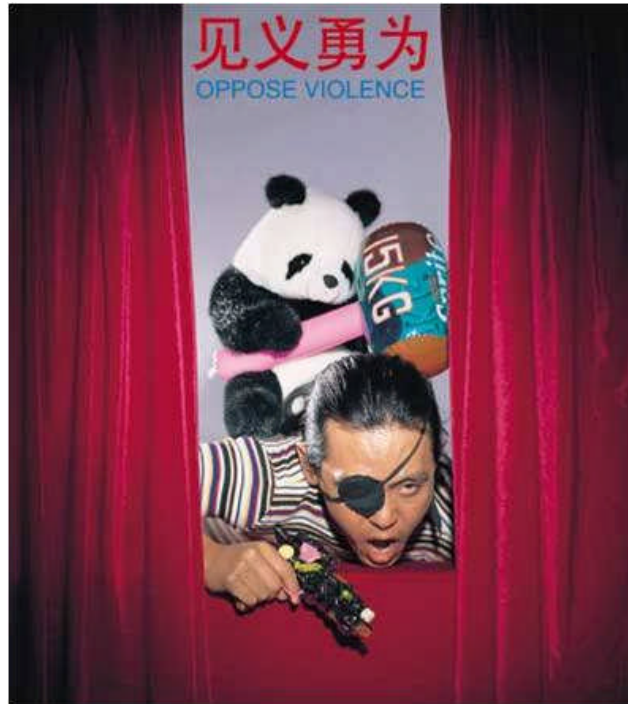


Figure 36 Zhao Bandi, *Zhao Bandi and the Panda: Oppose Violence*, 1999. Photo/C-print.

The ultimate deprivation of “artiness” has earned Zhao the “mass appeal” he desires—not as a commercial product, but as a propaganda device. The *Panda Series* may very well serve as public service announcements themselves, only better designed, more cleverly delivered and, in a way, more effective than the formulaic, didactic ones. This effectiveness is quickly recognized by the mainstream media; and given the fact that parody art is still so rare in China that people tend to take images displayed in the public sphere seriously, his works are repeatedly adopted by the government agencies for propaganda purposes. Some of his *Panda Series*, mounted as light boxes, are put up side by side with real commercials in the subways of Beijing. The Union invited him to meet

the laid-off workers; the Family Planning Commission in Beijing worked with him to



Figure 37

Zhao Bandi, *Block SARS, Defend Motherland*, 2003, digital photograph.

make posters promoting safe sex. During the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003, he made a poster of himself and the panda dressed like guerrilla fighters, wearing the face masks that were required at the time and holding a pair of toy guns, with a slogan “Stop SARS, Defend Homeland” printed on it (Fig. 37). This poster, though not entirely in tune with the official campaign at the time, seems to offer a well-intentioned comical relief at a time of anxiety and panic, and it ended up being posted on a government website that encouraged people to fight the disease. In recent years, Zhao Bandi, together with his panda, keeps on engaging in the latest and the most popular social events or “fads” in China. His recent works include *A Love Story Gone Wrong for the Pandaman*, (Nov. 11th

2003), in which he sued two companies for copyright violations and, carrying the toy panda to the court, turned the courtroom into a site of comedy and melodrama; the *Pandanan Visit* project (2007-present), for which he led the a group of assistants dressed in panda costumes to visit a variety of places, including distant rural villages, orphanages and retirement homes, as well as the GM factory in Shanghai; the *Olympics Project* in August 8, 2007, for which he staged a fake Olympics opening ceremony in Berne, Switzerland, with a profusion of panda mascots and costumes; and the *Panda Fashion Show* (Nov. 4th, 2007), in which he designed a series of panda-themed costumes that alluded to different social groups in contemporary China, and invited celebrities to be models. All the performances, captured by photographs, attracted wide media attention. Highly proficient in self-promotion and never losing his “soft, humorous” touch, Zhao Bandi has made his “pandaman” (*xiongmao ren*) persona a cultural phenomenon.

True to the mission the Chinese contemporary artists assigned for themselves, Zhao Bandi's has participated in the sphere of public life to a degree that is unparalleled by any other experimental artist in China, but his participation remains a matter of controversy in the art world. Like Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills*, Zhao Bandi's *Panda Series* shows a “postmodern disdain for originality” (Guimond, 578)—not only the work faithfully “copies” from the formula established by the popular culture, but the artist himself also disappears behind the persona he assumes in the picture, no longer recognizable as an “original” and creative individual. And also like Sherman, the simulation is so thorough in Zhao Bandi's photo series that it is no longer clear whether the work possesses any critical power at all, or merely replicates the ideological

repression embodied in the paradigms it simulates. Critics have argued that Sherman's *Film Stills* are successful "partly because they do not threaten phallocracy, but reiterate and confirm it" (Schor, 54), and the same could be said about the "pandaman" and the official propaganda culture it supposedly parodies: Zhao and his panda may have actually helped the causes the official culture advocates. The "stardom" of the artists earned in the cultural industry seems to further confirm their innate conformism. This "conformism", however, seems to be part of their visual strategy. The target of parody for both Sherman and Zhao Bandi is not only the commercial or political culture they imitate, but also modern art itself. As Barbara Miller points out, in an age when art and popular visual culture are so mixed up with each other that "many artists often discover that their images either support or are used to support causes they otherwise would not endorse," Sherman's images reflect a deeply ambiguous attitude towards image, media and art itself (Miller, 5). In other words, by displaying an ambiguous but deliberate conformism, these works set a contrast to the "mainstream" postmodern art in the image-flooded postindustrial world, where the "critical power" assumed by this art often contains an innate hypocrisy: when pretending to criticize the popular culture, it often falls back to an immediate and sensationalist "shock strategy" that has long been institutionalized by the popular culture itself; when claiming to reach for a wider audience, it often demands a knowledge and "taste" that is reserved for the elite viewers. Zhao Bandi's *Panda Series*, with its modest populism, rebels against such hypocrisy.

This hypocritical attitude is prevalent all over the art world today, but is especially relevant to the experimental art in China. As examined in previous chapters, without an

adequate system of exhibition and sponsorship, this art suffers a lack of domestic audience even more acutely than its counterpart in the West. On the other hand, in order to attract attention in the international art market and to get—no matter how brief and distorted—media exposure in China, the artists compete with each other in creating the most radical images, and end up pushing the ordinary Chinese viewers, most of whom had little or no education in modern art, even further away from their works. In this context, Zhao Bandi's approach seems particularly subtle and refreshing. In his interview with Karen Smith, Zhao admits that he grew up with propaganda art, and the artists of his generation are “taught about the type of works we should create as being suitable for the public arena”; but instead of breaking away from this assigned position, he decides to play along and take on “the role of an educator”. This voluntary affiliation with the official discourse resembles Xu Bing’s claim that he intends his art to “serve the people”, but while Xu Bing detaches himself from his art, Zhao Bandi infuses himself with the pop culture images he creates. He cultivates his “pandaman” persona so religiously that it becomes increasingly difficult to tell his “true personality” apart from the role he assumes in public. During his interview with Karen Smith, Zhao Bandi says that he realized early in his career that “being a persona was more important than being an artist *per se*,” and he remains true to this revelation in the rest of his career. In almost all his interactions with the media and the public, from interviews and speeches to exhibition receptions and his personal blog, Zhao Bandi tends to use diction more appropriate for a celebrity than an avant-garde artist, never speaks directly of his possible ironical intentions, and treats his toy panda as if it were a living being. This Andy-Warhol-like tongue-in-cheek-ness

proves to be more successful in the “public arena” than the type of propaganda works the Chinese artists were taught to produce, and this fact compels one to think about the arbitrariness of the visual culture itself—not only that the photographed “reality”, manipulated by the combination of political and commercial culture, could be no more than fictions, but also the world of fictions, as created by performance and manipulated photographs, can become a part of the everyday reality. Almost paradoxically, while abnegating the originality of his art, Zhao Bandi's pandaman once more demonstrates the powerful “realism” of the photographic imagery.

Conclusion

In the above four chapters, I have traced the unique manner of “copying” and imitation in contemporary Chinese art, which, contrary to what many critics have argued, is often a deliberate strategy coined by individual artists to reach a new conceptualization of originality. Overall, those artists innovate through their construction as well as manipulation of the contexts, and, in present-day China, the contexts they interact with has multiple folds. It includes, first, the brief yet overloaded history of modernization, during which the theories, styles and institutional structures of western modern art were at the same time enthusiastically imitated and vehemently challenged in China; secondly, the established tradition of copying (*mofang*) in classical Chinese art, combined with the postmodern critique of originality, both of which, however, are reinterpreted and recreated by the contemporary and local discourses; and lastly, the modern Chinese society itself, swashed in the rapid process of urbanization and flooded with the mechanical reproductions of political as well as popular cultural icons, in which experimental art possesses a marginal status and commands little attention outside of its own circles. In these particular contexts, the artists choose to reflect on—and therefore to redefine—their own positions in the cultural field, by emulating the paradigms created by such contexts, selectively and ironically; as a result, they bring illuminating insights on the understanding of modernity, Chinese identity, and art itself.

Copying and imitation has always been a part of art practice, and was considered an essential aspect of art production until the nineteenth century. The early European modernists, however, advocated an originality that was unprecedented and revolutionary,

creating an “aura” that helped to sustain the privileged status of art in an age when the techniques of mechanical reproduction became widely available. This “cult of originality” was attacked by postmodern art criticism in the second half of twentieth century, but the concept remains a key criterion in the art world today. For the western artists, this originality is often manifested in their active engagement in the “frontier” theoretical issues in art, while the “third world” artists, whose exploration of the same issues are likely to be dismissed as secondary and unimportant, have to exploit their “indigenous identities” to appear original. Also, while western artists may feel free to draw inspirations from non-western cultures to coin their own styles, when the third world artists draw from the repertory of western art, they are likely to be criticized as derivative.

Contemporary Chinese art, having borrowed heavily from the West, is particular susceptible to such criticism. Some critics, as I mentioned in the Introduction, believe that the Chinese artists’ readiness to imitate the West can be attributed to the tradition of copying old pieces in China. Because of the extreme responsiveness of the writing brush and, consequently, the swift and spontaneous manner of its execution, it is virtually impossible to make an identical copy of calligraphy and brush-paintings; the Chinese tradition of copying, therefore, is never meant to be mechanical. Ideally, the copier attempts to enter the “spirit” (*shen*) of the bygone masters, to be absorbed in the flow of natural energy that could be shared by all beings, living or inanimate. In practice, the tradition of copying serves different purposes in the process of art productions—to preserve a fragile piece, to continue a stylistic or compositional tradition, or to construct

an inter-referential context in which an artist may create his own identity through his observation and reinterpretation of previous styles.

Contemporary Chinese artists, however, did not merely inherit their proclivity to copy from the classical tradition. Well versed in the western theories, they combine various techniques of “copying”, imitation and appropriation in their works to address a number of political, social and cultural issues in present-day China, as well as to challenge the conventional concept of originality in art. Calligraphy and photography, two media that seem to be on the two extremes of the spectrum, are both thoroughly engrossed in the paradox between originality and imitation, and are therefore chosen as the media I focus on in this project. The former is based on repetitive copying of previous works, yet set spontaneity and individual expression as its ultimate pursuit; the latter is, by nature, the facilitator of mechanical reproductions in the modern world, but has in fact created a “photographic reality” that is often manipulated and fictional. Also, the former, as an art of words, has been, and still is, deeply integrated with the political and cultural authorities of Chinese society, while the later has long become the most proliferate witness of the social changes China is going through, as well as the most powerful tool in shaping people’s perceptions of such changes. Both media are prominent in contemporary Chinese art practice today. My studies of four individual Chinese artists, Xu Bing, Qiu Zhijie, Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi, focus on how their works have explored such paradoxes within their respective media.

Xu Bing’s derives his concept of “fake characters” from the experiments of others artists, but only through his painstaking executions does this concept become significant

and intriguing. He also constantly “reproduces” and reinvents his art in different contexts, through methods that seem increasingly mechanical and “impersonal”. However, by holding his individuality back from his artworks, he enables different groups of viewers to engage in the creative “copying” of calligraphy, and to experience the art more intimately. Qiu Zhijie’s obsessive yet futile copying of the prestigious *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (*Lantingji xu*) returns calligraphy to its essentials—a series of meditative “mini-dance” of the body, through which the mind may share the exhilarating sentiments with the old masters. His visual interpretation of “impermanence” (*wuchang*) provides a uniquely Chinese way to see the dynamic balance between repetition and change, transience and constancy: the artists, in this impermanent cycle of life, may only leave a “mark” of existence that echoes through generations. Xu and Qiu’s works investigate, respectively, the public and private aspects of the calligraphic art, which is consummated in the act of copying—as means to distribute a work to a wider audience as well as to sustain a tradition through personal lineage.

Hong Hao and Zhao Bandi both use the camera—not to reproduce the reality, but to imitate the “originals” offered by other cultural products. Hong Hao’s photographic reproductions of *Along the River during the Spring Festival* (*Qingming shanghe tu*) employ the Chinese tradition of “updating” the old paintings through innovative copying, which allows the established format to be reviewed and reinterpreted, therefore having the old and the new to be combined with ease. In Hong Hao’s “copies”, however, the ancient and the modern scenes of the same city no longer exist in an untroubled harmony, and the representative power of photography appears inadequate in capturing the grand

urban space. Zhao Bandi's *Zhao Bandi and the Panda Series* appropriates a cliché from popular culture to poke fun at the way art and propaganda are received in present-day China, and to challenge the boundary between representation and “reality”, truth and fiction. Taking advantage of the peculiar cultural context of China, in which parody art is still rare in the public sphere, Zhao Bandi deliberately makes his simulacra of the pop culture indistinguishable from the pop culture itself, and questions the privileged status of “fine arts” in a way that is humorous yet provocative. Comparing with Hong Hao's ironic photo-collage, which clearly reveals the limit of photography in reproducing reality, Zhao Bandi's self-conscious assimilation is nearly complete, which enables his art to have a social impact and to reach a broader audience.

All the four artists have drawn liberally from both the Chinese and the western traditions. While dealing with calligraphy, the quintessentially Chinese art, both Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie's experiments are clearly under the influence of western theories, and can be easily interpreted with postmodern concepts; however, instead of turning calligraphy into an abstract art, they sought to return it to its original characteristics, as means of—though often distorted and futile—communications and of physical as well as spiritual interactions with the brush. Hong Hao's “copies” of the ancient painting draw interesting comparisons between the modern art of photo-collage and the traditional Chinese method of copying an old piece with contemporary features. Zhao Badi's self-fragmentation and self-promotion is inspired by artists such as Cindy Sherman and Andy Warhol, but his attitude towards propaganda and pop culture evidently comes from a Chinese environment. The artists' ambiguous treatment of those traditions, it seems, does not

point to a “synthetic modernism” of binaries, but suggests the communicability among those different resources, indicating that the conventional division between Chinese and western, traditional and modern, is often arbitrary.

But above all, the Chinese artists’ experiments have positively engaged with the postmodern critique of originality. This critique, as I have reviewed in the second chapter, consists of two aspects: first, to deconstruct the singularity of the subject and, consequently, to demystify the aura of originality of the works produced by such subject; secondly, to challenge the modern institutions, which construct and consecrate the modernist myth of originality. In practice, postmodern art adopts techniques such as ready-mades, collage, silkscreening and photographic appropriations, and brings heterogeneous, conventionally non-art materials such as site-specific installation and interactive performance to the exhibition space. The Chinese artists, while drawing from the western theories and practices, have also demonstrated that originality and repetition are “two terms bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy” (Krauss, 155) in manners that were unique to the Chinese context, introducing methods and insights that were never explored in the western art world. Xu Bing’s supremely crafted and psychological compelling “pseudo-characters” reveals that originality may not reside in the invention of a concept, but in the site-specific execution of an existing concept. His “playing” with the legibility of languages also suggests that “logocentrism”, even more powerful in Chinese culture than in the West, is no more than an authoritative discourse with rules that are arbitrary but also ambivalent, always subject to individual manipulations. Qiu Zhijie’s repetitive copying of a long-disappeared “original” masterpiece shows that an “original”

exists in none other than the cumulative imaginations of its admirers and imitators; the individuality behind the initial creation may be more universal than unique—it can be revoked again and again through the recreation of the same contexts, and, consequently, the reconstruction of the similar mental and emotional states. Hong Hao’s experiments in various photographic reproductions of the same painting prove that selective “copying”, instead of destroying the aura of the original, may actually enhance it, enabling the compositional ingenuity of the original to be constantly appreciated and reassessed. It also brings out the fact that a visual tradition is in no way static, but is constituted by continuous innovations of the paradigm, which in turn provides the framework where further innovation may take place. Zhao Bandi’s simulacra of the “public service announcements”, catering to the unique way of visual consumption in present-day China, practically eliminates the distinction between “fine arts” and other cultural products, and pushes the postmodern self-criticism of art to a most precarious level. His work also proposes that avant-garde art, if giving up its elite stance, can reach a wider audience and serve a social function; but unlike the propaganda art it simulates, the impact of Zhao’s art is playful and ambiguous, sending its messages directly while leaving a range of interpretive possibilities for the audiences to choose.

Zhao Bandi’s *Panda Series*, together with the experimental projects of many other artists, also opened new venues for the displaying of contemporary art. As reviewed in the first chapter, ever since the early 1990s, the experimentation on exhibition spaces and methods was particularly active and innovative in China, some of which, such as the *Wildlife* that was coordinated over a vast space but had no institutionalized exhibition

space to speak of, were quite “avant-garde”, even comparing with the art world at large. Of course, unlike the western artists’ postmodern rebellion against the establishment, the Chinese artists were more concerned with finding opportunities to display their art in a highly restricted environment, but they do share a common task with their western counterparts: to break out from the conventional museums and the commercial art circles, and to seek for a more diversified, more engaged group of audiences. This task demands not only innovations in the exhibition methods but also radical changes in the very concept of art productions, namely, a shift towards more communal, interactive ways of creating and appreciating art. The contemporary Chinese artists, most of whom having been taught to create art that serves a mass audience during their early lives, seem to be more resourceful than their western counterparts in approaching this re-conceptualization of art. Both Xu Bing and Zhao Bandi have talked about their affiliation with the revolution period, and have attributed their populist approach to those experiences. This affiliation, however, seems to be less motivated by nostalgia for propaganda art than by yearning for more localized structures of art—structures that may live out of, and beyond, the unproblematic adoption of the western system. Qiu Zhijie once asked in a critical essay “Do we really need a Biennale?” He argued that Biennales, like the modern Olympics or the World Fairs, originated from the imperialist urge to gather the wonders of the world and to display them under one roof. It is a type of Eurocentric “cultural anthropology” that, ultimately, draws from a global repertory to create a national spectacle. The third world’s appropriation of this system, on the other hand, has become part of the “cultural capital” that may validate their modernized status to the West, as

well as a battlefield in which they may compete with each other culturally. In China, Biennales are especially unnecessary because, being large and “legitimate”, they are more suspected to censorship and self-censorship; also, the financial resources used in one Biennale—around four millions RMB in the case of the Chengdu Biennale in 2001—would be enough to sponsor a hundred small exhibitions, which could have kept a much better track of the fast-paced development of art in China (Qiu, *Geiwo yige mianju*, 56-8).

If Biennales are not the best way to provide comprehensive views of experimental art in China, then what is? The *Long March Project (Changzheng Jihua)*, launched by the art critic Lu Jie in 2002 and co-curated by Qiu Zhijie, have answered this question with remarkable success. As a large-scale exhibition held outside of the conventional museum space, it was at once “imitative” and radically original. For four months, it followed the trek of the historical “Long March”—a much glorified event in the history of the Communist Party, during which Mao Zedong led the flailing Red Army for nearly six thousand miles of mostly impoverished rural areas to their new military base Yan’an—with dozens of professional artists (mostly Chinese, but several prominent western and overseas artists, such as Judy Chicago and Xu Bing, have also participated) and even more local participants creating and displaying works on the road. According to the curators, the *Project* has taken not only the geographical framework of the historical Long March, but also its method, spirit and ethics, which was “avant-garde” at its own time:

its romantic ideals of turning failure to success, of taking to the road in search of utopia, of founding an alternative democratic society through engagement with the masses, leaders and soldiers, of representing the

intellectuals to the people, of holding imported theories and tactics up to the lens of reality in the local context, of generating the new and powerful praxis that led ultimately to the founding the current Chinese state. (Lu Jie, *Preface*, 4).

Despite this “grand narrative”, the *Project* was not meant to be a further continuation and glorification of the historical Long March; it was, as Lu and Qiu suggested, an attempt to re-experience and “reconstruct” the memories left by the revolution era. This memory is still very much alive in present-day China, but few people want to confront it in its historical totality: it was either lamented and ridiculed, or mystified and idolized. Both attitudes are manifested in contemporary art, constituting a “visual politics” that mixes irony with nostalgia; in fact, this politics has become one of the most important resources from which Chinese artists find their visual prototypes, a “Chinese card” that always has easy appeal to the western market. The *Project*, on the other hand, reviewed an important part of the revolutionary memory in its original context, among the people who grew up from it, and who felt its impact the most acutely. The artists and the local residents, through their interaction and cooperation in revolutionary-themed artworks, each have gained an understanding of the memory that was not available in their previous experiences.

Despite all the revolutionary undertones, the *Project* was, first and foremost, a reaction to the contemporary “art world” in China—a world dominated by the overseas market and the commercialized “districts” of a few metropolitan cities. For the majority of Chinese people, such as those living along the Long March route, avant-garde art remains entirely irrelevant and inaccessible. The historical Long March, on the other

hand, did function as an effective tool in spreading its ideology to the part of China that was traditionally ignored by the urban elites, therefore filling in the vast space that could not be reached by the modern institutions; the Party's ability to adapt to, and then to transform, a great number of rural villages on its move, as manifested during the March, was truly "the new and powerful praxis that led ultimately to the founding the current Chinese state." The *Project*, therefore, tried to "copy" the pattern of the Long March to set up an alternative to the western-oriented art institutions—institutions that, for better or worse, have already become part of the heritage of the contemporary Chinese artists themselves. As Qiu and Lu said plainly in their *Curators' Words*, "The question of how we face up to 'the West' is in reality a question of how we face up to ourselves, and only a critical and creative self-understanding will provide the foundation for an answer." (Lu, 9) The Chinese Communist Revolution, itself influenced by western theories but has long been held as an antithesis of the western modernity, serves as a point of departure for such self-understandings. Some of the "themes" during the *Project* tour, such as "journey, pilgrimage and the construction of icons" (Site 3) and "textual imagination and narration of China by the West from 60s until present" (Site 4), clearly indicates this historical, self-critical and multi-perspective approach.

The *Project* had twelve "Sites" on its tour, from Ruijin, Jiangxi province to the Luding Bridge at Sichuan province, and, taking full advantage of the historical, social and demographic peculiarities of the sites visited, it has come up with numerous innovations. At Site 6, the Lugu Lake on the border of Sichuan and Yunnan, where the matriarchal Mosuo minority lives, the artworks focused on the "the gender discourse, both Chinese

and Western, and its relationship to art practice” as well as “the utopian elements of a matriarchal society viewed by two generations of personal experiences”. “The function of art and technology” was among the theme at Site 10, where the Xichang Satellite Station was located. More often, the integration of the art projects and their particular locality works at a more subtle and well-rounded manner. At the legendary Jianggangshan mountain, for example, the artists stayed for four days, organizing exhibitions and activities including: 1) Li Fang’s Installation/Performance *Memory of Memory (Jiyi de jiyi)*, in which he wrote random revolution slogans and commercial phrases on a string of straw mats, spreading on the lawns outside of the Octagonal Pavilion Revolutionary Museum, where Mao used to live and where the First Soviet Congress was held; 2) public screening of Michelangelo Antonioni’s documentary *Chung Kuo-Cina* (1972) and of contemporary artist Jiang Zhi’s video *A Few Minutes of a Person* (2002) at the Chinese Red Army Hospital, both of which focus on close observations of ordinary Chinese citizens, though from radically different periods and perspectives; 3) Wang Jin’s performance *Hanging Swords on the Cliff with Swords Hung Up-Side Down (Qiangshang diaodao, dao daodiao zhe)* at the Jinggangshan Mountain, in which he hanged 93 antique swords down from a cliff, forming a V-shaped fern, then had himself hung upside-down paralleled to the swords; 4) Sui Jianguo’s “walking sculpture” *Marx in China*, in which he had a human-sized sculpture of Marx, wearing a Mao’s suit, carried on a bamboo raft down the river, and his project *Jesus in China*, in which he distributed small sculptures of Jesus on a Cross, also dressed in Mao’s suits, to the crowd in a relic of a local Catholic church that was once used as a Red Army base camp; 5) Qu Guangci’s

performance *Who is the Third Party? (Shei shi disanzhe?)*, for which he carried a stuffed figure of himself on his back, and asked the villagers he met to take a poll choosing the “New Model Long Marcher” (*xin changzheng biaobing*) from the works they saw; 6) a retro exhibition of the Chinese experimental art in the 1990s, mostly in reproductions, held at the tourist stores and outdoor vendors in the same museum, mounted simply and displayed side by side with regular merchandize. Apparently, all the artworks were designed with the local scenes in mind, and they became meaningful only in their particular context.

Most importantly, the artists in the *Project* engaged with the local population, as well as with the indigenous culture they possess, to a degree that reached beyond the conventional territory of art. During a day of performance in Jinggangshan, for instance, Qu Guangci, with the effigy figure he carried, first drew the attention of a crowd into the museum; Qiu Zhijie then gave cold beverages to the crowd and started playing with the local children, having them help to put up the retro exhibition in the museum store. When the audience expressed interests in an item on the exhibition, the curators let them take it home afterwards.⁸⁵ Similar pattern of attracting the local audiences’ attention, seeking their participation, and then distributing the artifacts among them—a pattern that clearly “copied” from the Red Army—was repeated in other sites, usually with satisfactory results. In many cases, the audiences were involved in the actual creation of artworks. At Site 4, Site 8 and Site 9, the local residents were, respectively, asked to collectively draw an ink-brush painting, to paint a large portrait of a pop TV star on the floor, and to make

⁸⁵ See “Report on the Road”, the journal of the *Long March Project*, July 9th, 2002 at <http://www.longmarchspace.com/e-progress2-1.htm>.

Jackson Pollock style abstract paintings after being given plenty of alcohol (Fig. 38). The “Long Marchers” also had the local art communities, most of which never thought of becoming “modern” or “avant-garde”, collaborating in many activities. They put up their own exhibitions side by side with those of the Long March artists,⁸⁶ or got invited to create a work for the *Project* with their own expertise. Some folk artists were found to be remarkably “modern” in this process: the stone carver Jiang Jiwei produced a “Quotation



Figure 38

Collective Creation of Pollock Style Abstract Painting, Maotai, Guizhou, 2002.

⁸⁶ At Site 1, Ruijin, Jiangxi province, for example, three exhibitions of local artists were held, from the Calligraphers’ Association, the Photographers’ Association, and the Artists Association on revolutionary subject matters.

Mountain” (*yulu shan*) during more than two decades of his reclusive life in a mountain, sculpting bas-reliefs of Mao Zedong and other national heroes and engraving quotations from their writings all over the space, creating an astonishing landscape of memorials (Site 3); Guo Fengyi, a female folk artist, carried a “dialogue” with Judy Chicago on the topic of “What If Women Ruled the World” with her anthropomorphous paintings (Site 5). Those experiments once again showed the power of non-elite and non-westernized art, and questioned the conventional “binary” between the modern and the traditional.

Admittedly, the communal spirit of the *Project*, though claiming its heritage from the revolutionary past, was not free from western influences. Lu Jie came up with the idea during his studying at the University of London, through his interactions with pro-left British intellectuals.⁸⁷ The artists still used typically western media such as video and sound works to facilitate their interactions with the audiences, and the “Relational Art” from the 1990s, exemplified by artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Carsten Höller, clearly had an impact on the Long March ethics. However, while those “Relational artists” still, by and large, interact with their audiences in museums and galleries, which invariably stamp their works as art no matter how devious they may seem like, the Long Marchers let go of the “aura” as artists the most resolutely. The non-institutionalized locality of their artworks, combined with the audiences’ unfamiliarity and, to an extent, indifference of modern art, may completely obliterate the division between art and life, performance and reality. Many works realized in the *Project* did manage to merge with life itself. All through the journey, Wang Jingsong broadcasted the self-composed *Long March Artistic*

⁸⁷ “An Interview with Lu Jie” at Chongqing, on August 18, 2002, at <http://www.longmarchspace.com/english/e-discourse1.htm>.

Manifesto (Changzheng xuanyan shu) in the local dialects of the region they passed, and Xiao Xiong used his own “goods”, started with a porcelain statuette of Mao, to exchange for other objects with local residents. Both performances were often taken by their participants as acts of propaganda and commerce—though of the bizarre kind—instead of as art. At Site 7, on the train from Kunming to Zunyi, the Long Marchers staged a series of performances that centered on the theme “necessity and chance”, aiming at offering the passengers an unmediated encounter with art. They hanged landscape paintings and commercial-style photographs (such as one of Zhao Bandi *Panda Series* that asked people to stop smoking) on the windows, put up fliers that made false announcements (Zhu Fadong), gave away souvenirs and Long March T-shirts, lent the passengers books for free (Ma Han), and asked them to select and read random passages from the Chinese Constitution (Wang Chuyu). All the activities stimulated and amused the passengers, yet leaving them slightly puzzled. Such experiences, no doubt, were very much different from what the regular art viewers could have had in a museum. The fact that they are still, fundamentally, aesthetic experiences, again compels one to rethink the very nature of art.

The *Long March Project*, with no government or commercial sponsorship, was realized through the communal cooperation that was always prominent among the Chinese artists.⁸⁸ On the journey, the artists went through numerous difficulties, constantly struggling with the road situations, lack of supplies, resistance and suspicions

⁸⁸ Financially, it was sponsored by the Long March Foundation, a non-profit organization based in New York City, in conjunction with 25000 Cultural Transmission Center in Beijing, its Chinese counterpart. The Foundation was initiated by the curator Lu Jie in 1998, for four years afterwards, artists submitted their proposals and donated their works to the project, mostly through words of the mouth networking.

from the local people and authorities, as well as the poor executions and unexpected outcomes of some experiments; the process was, in a word, full of “clashes between idealism and pragmatism”, which was at once frustrating and inspirational.⁸⁹ Partly due to those difficulties, the *Project* was called off before it was officially “completed”—the curators originally planned for 20 Sites, with Yan’an being the final stop—but the impact it has made on the art world was already immense. Many discussions ensued among artists, curators and intellectuals in China; the works created during the *Project* were featured in a series of exhibitions, including the 2004 Shanghai Biennale *Techniques of the Visible*; and more importantly, the journey continued in various ways. In a few years, the same curators have launched a series projects including *A General Survey of Paper-Cut Art in Yanchuan County* (June 30-July 30, 2004), *The Long March Yan’an Project* (May 2-Sep 30, 2006), *Yanchuan Primary School Papercutting Art Curriculum* (an ongoing project started Sep 2006) and *Survey of Tibetan Subject Matter in Painting* (Aug 18-Sep 16, 2007), all of which sponsored by the Long March Foundation. Still rural-based and public-oriented, those later projects were better organized, with a clearly anthropological and educational approach. In January, 2005, a new “Long March Space” opened in the 798 art district in Beijing, regularly hosting exhibitions, lectures and public events involving the Long March artists. Outside of China, the *Project* also received a great deal of attentions. Since its first exposure at the Ethan Cohan Gallery at the New York City, in November, 2002, it has been featured in over thirty exhibitions in Japan,

⁸⁹ Quote from “An Interview with Lu Jie”, see Note 88. The difficulties the Long Marchers went through are recorded in “Reports from the Road” (*yantu zhanbao*), available at <http://www.longmarchspace.com/> in both Chinese and English.

Korea, North and Latin America, Europe, Australia and Africa. In 2007, the *Long March Project—No Chinatown* was held at Auckland, New Zealand, engaging with the local community while investigating the concepts of Chinatown and diaspora identity. The *Project* has also participated in twelve Biennales and Triennales, including the 2008 Sydney Biennale *Revolution: Forms that Turn*, for which the Chinese artists designed an online interactive project “Long Marchers of the World—Unite! Have YOU joined the Long March?” The Long March spirit, it seems, will continue to spread, in and beyond the art sphere.

It may seem curious, even ironic, that the *Long March Project*, started as a criticism of the art world, is receiving so many tributes from this world, but it is precisely such criticism, reached through a “creative and critical self-understanding,” that keeps modern art original. In the current art world, where the “aura” of individual artworks has long been undermined by the techniques of reproduction, the criticism is more and more focused on the general structure of art—the mechanism that legitimizes and consecrates certain types of art while excluding others. When asked to give a definition of the contemporary art, Kwok Kian Chow, the director of the Singapore Art Museum, says that “contemporary art is marked by the meta-position it takes toward the art-world, by incorporating into art a critique of the art world system, value structure and institutions.” In doing so, as the Australian critic Thomas Berghuis argues, this art “rearranges our perceptions of time, place, and space, and challenges social behavior and public conduct.” (Conteau, 45) Measured within this definition of contemporary art, which is shared by many prominent art curators and critics, the avant-gardism of the *Long March*

Project appears even more remarkable. Firmly situated in Chinese context and “copying” from the propaganda patterns of the historical Long March, the *Project* nevertheless engaged fully with the most “frontier” issues in the art world at large, and created a “meta-position” that is truly original. It is true that, after three decades of searching for an indigenous modernity, the Chinese artists are still “playing cards with Cézanne”, but they are entering the game with more cards in their hands.

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