

1-1-2013

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Published version. "Then and Now: Globalization and the Avant-Garde in Chinese Contemporary Art," in *Gimme Shelter: Global Discourses in Aesthetics*. Jos de Mul and Renée van de Vall. Amsterdam: International Association of Aesthetics, 2013: 129-141. [Publisher Link](#). © 2013 International Association of Aesthetics. Used with permission.

9 Then and now

Globalization and the avant-garde in Chinese contemporary art¹

Curtis L. Carter

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My interest in globalization in reference to Chinese contemporary art began with a paper, "Conceptual Art: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?" which was published in the *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Volume 8, 2004. In the previous paper the focus was on a comparison of global conceptual art in the works of Xu Bing (Chinese) and Joseph Kosuth (North American). Since that time, I have continued my investigation of contemporary Chinese art with a particular interest in the global exchanges that have taken place between China and the West, as it relates to the efforts of Chinese artists to address the question of how to build upon their rich Chinese heritage while addressing the international influences wrought by globalization and ongoing internal changes.

Global art in this context refers to art that is a part of, or participates in world-wide cultural exchange or commerce.² The particular focus here will be the role of globalization in the creation of an avant-garde art in China. Given the recent global mobility of Chinese artists between Western art centers in Europe and America and China, the effects of globalization must include the impact of their movement on contemporary Chinese art, as well as the movement of art from West to East.

In some respects, the development of avant-garde art in China runs parallel to the introduction of Western aesthetics into China as they both are introduced in the early years of the twentieth century and involve the flow of ideas from West to East. Gao Jianping's writings on this topic in "Chinese Aesthetics in the Context of Globalization," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Volume 8, 2004, and elsewhere offer a complementary account of the influences of Western aesthetics on the twentieth century developments in Chinese aesthetics.

Aside from any global Western influences on Chinese art that may have resulted from the presence of the Jesuit artists of the seventeenth century in China, or the contributions of indigenous moments such as Dao or Chan Buddhism to

¹ Copyright, All rights Reserved, March 26, 2012

² Curtis L. Carter, "Conceptual Art: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics* 8 (2004): 15-28.

the spirit of the avant-garde, in China, there has been a significant presence of the avant-garde in China, beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, and continuing to the present.³ Avant-garde art has persisted, notwithstanding notable interventions such as the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, uneasiness of official government agencies, and the resistance of the population at large to embrace new and unfamiliar forms of art that do not fit traditional assumptions concerning art.

Before proceeding further into the subject of the avant-garde art in China, it is necessary to discuss the question, to what extent, and under what conditions it is possible to apply Western art-historical concepts such as 'avant-garde' to non-Western art? An extensive body of writings on the Western aesthetic avant-garde is available to document the importance of this development in the West and in China. In essence, the research will reveal two key notions of Western avant-garde theory and practice. Differences between proponents of the avant-garde based on aesthetic considerations, and the proponents of art in support of radical social change have existed since the early nineteenth century, as reflected in the writings of Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and others. Saint-Simon saw the artists as agents of social change, and Baudelaire writing in 1851 condemned the notion of 'art for art's sake'.⁴ At its height in Paris of the 1920s and 1930s when Paris reigned as the art capitol of the world, the avant-garde in the West manifests itself most fully in Dada and Surrealism. It is said that the Surrealists of the 1920s and 1930s literally turned an orderly view of bourgeois life upside down by introducing a new form of myth aimed at freeing all minds.⁵

With respect to its societal applications, Peter Bürger writing in the late twentieth century represents the social avant-garde as an antidote to the dissociation of art from the praxis of life in a bourgeois society. Following Jürgen Habermas, Bürger views the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century as an attack on art, which he believed existed mainly in an anaesthetized state in bourgeois society.⁶ Bürger found missing from the autonomous institution of art as it exists in bourgeois society the social engagement required to produce radical social change. Art when connected to life, he believes, can serve as a positive force against tyrannical political and economic developments and as an aid to actualizing freedom and justice.

There now exists as well an extensive body of writings on the Western aesthetic avant-garde. Among these are the writings of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosen-

3 For further development of this topic see Curtis L. Carter, "Avant Garde in Chinese Art," in *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*, eds., Mar Wiseman and Liu Yuedi (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011), 295-320.

4 Henri de Saint-Simon, "Opinions Littéraires, Philosophiques et Industrielles (Paris, 1825)," in *Oeuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin (1865-1879)*, vol. 39 (Aalen: Reprint, 1964).

5 See Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World*, trans., Arthur Goldblammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 383-397.

6 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 49.

berg, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and others.⁷ In contrast to the social approach, these writers focused on the avant-garde in reference to the developments in Western Modernism as it manifest itself in stylistic changes: Impressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism and other modern developments centering in Paris, and later in New York. Among these writers, Krauss proposed abandonment of 'avant-garde' as a useful concept for interpreting Western art after Modernism beyond 1970 because of changes in critical theory and the emergence of post-modern art. Krauss's view is not widely supported, as there has been a continuing development of avant-garde both in the West and in the East.⁸

The question, then, is what is the rationale for the application of avant-garde art theory to artistic developments in China? Although the term 'avant-garde' has previously been mainly identified with developments in modern Western art, it is also necessary to recognize the corresponding elements in Chinese art and culture. During the past ten years, Chinese avant-garde art has become the focus of several important books by Chinese scholars such as Wu Hung (*Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 2000), Xiao Tang (*Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut*, 2008), and Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde in Twentieth Century China*, (2011).⁹ Each of these writers addresses an aspect of the emergence of the avant-garde in China that began in the 1920s.

Xiao Tang frames the connection between avant-garde in the West and its relevance for Chinese art in the context of the modern woodcut movement in China that took place in China in the 1920s and thirties in the context of the political and institutional changes that occurred in Republican China. He argues that the Chinese woodcut movement, which has its roots in part in Western Expressionist woodcuts, qualifies as avant-garde because it challenged prevailing aesthetics in China and provided a link between art and the nation's political agenda. Following Bürger's analysis of avant-garde in the West, Tang argues that, "On at least two issues, the Chinese woodcut movement had much in common with the historical avant-garde movements in early twentieth century Europe, such as Dadaism: it voiced a radical critique of art as an institution or social subsystem, and it aimed at

⁷ Clement Greenburg, "Culture in General: Avant-garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) Harold Rosenberg, "Avant-garde," in *Quality: its image in the arts*, eds. Louis Kronenberger and Marshall Lee (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 418-449; Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 156; Hal Foster, *The Return of the real: The avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1966), 5-15. See also Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Gerald Fitz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁸ Hal Foster argues against "a premature dismissal of the *avant-garde*." He asserts that critical theory of the middle 1970s was itself a secret continuation of the avant-garde. See Hal Foster, *The Return of the real*, 5-15.

⁹ Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: The Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000). Xiaobing Tang, *Origins of the Chinese Avant Garde: The Modern Woodcut* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2008).

reintegrating art into the praxis of life".¹⁰ For Chinese artists, as Tang observed, this meant confronting both "a nascent modern system of artistic values and practices" and "an entrenched traditional aesthetic order and sensibility".

In contrast to Tang's focus on the early years, Gao Minglu's account of the avant-garde attends mainly to the role and character of this development in China during the past thirty years. If it were the case that the avant-garde's influence in Western art had diminished after 1970, as Krauss suggested, the opposite is true in China where avant-garde art has indeed flourished during this period. With the emergence of new art spaces for the production and exhibition of art representing an expansion of artists' studios, artists' villages, and now art districts, as Gao Minglu argues, there is increasing evidence for a burgeoning Chinese avant-garde art. In addition, the increasing progress toward political tolerance of artistic freedom, art academies, and the global commercial system allow for expanded dialogue among artists and their audiences.¹¹

A common theme found in these writings is the aim of linking art and politics (Tang), or the embrace of a new Chinese modernity that unifies politics, aesthetics and social life (Gao Minglu). For Tang this aim is to be realized by a fusion of Western and Chinese aesthetic and artistic practices so as to forge a new tool for addressing changing political or societal aspirations, as in woodcut art.

Taking a broader theoretical approach, Gao Minglu understands Chinese avant-garde in reference to modernity. He contrasts Western modernity based on a progression of temporal-historical epochs (pre-modern, modern, post-modern) where the avant-garde emerges in the conflict between aesthetic autonomy seeking individual creative freedom and capitalist bourgeois materialist values, with "total modernity" in Chinese contemporary culture. According to Gao Minglu, Chinese history does not fit the linear periodization of the Western system. Total modernity, as Gao Minglu argues, consists of "particular time, particular space, and truth of mine," and represents a century-long effort in China to realize an ideal environment by focusing on specific physical spaces and social environments. Contemporary avant-garde art in China as understood in the context of "total modernity" thus aims toward integrating art and life as a whole by concatenating art into particular social projects and taking into account changes in the social and political environments.¹² Given these assumptions, as Gao Minglu would argue, Chinese avant-garde art today is best understood in the context of specific local time and space embodiments. This does not mean that the Chinese embodiments occur in isolation from external influences or artistic movement from the West, as Gao Minglu acknowledges the influences of Dada, Surrealism, and Pop art explicitly. Similarly he recognizes the complexities of globalization and other shifting social and political forces for Chinese avant-garde artists.

10 Xiaobing Tang, *Origins of the Chinese Avant Garde: The Modern Woodcut* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

11 Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde in Twentieth Century Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 2-5.

12 Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde*, 3, 4.

Wu Hung's approach to Chinese contemporary art in his book, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* focuses on the problems with public exhibiting of the art, beginning with the first experimental exhibition of the Stars group held outside the National Gallery of China in 1979. As Wu Hung represents experimental art, it differs from official art under sponsorship of the party, academic art focused on technical training and aesthetics standards, popular urban visual culture attuned to international fashion, and international commercial art.¹³ He prefers the concept of 'experimental art' (shiyān meishu) to 'avant-garde' (qiānwēi or xiānfēng), possibly to differentiate current developments from its more radical historical meanings or to avoid the confrontational tone implicit in 'avant-garde'. (Gao Minglu prefers the latter, arguing that the more moderate term 'experimental' is not well suited to express the range and 'contemporaneity' of the new art movements from the 1970s to the present.)¹⁴

Judging from this brief review of literature applicable to the theory and practice of the avant-garde in China, it appears that this concept has relevance to the development of art in China as well as to artistic developments in the European-American context.

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In the remainder of the paper I will offer an additional perspective on the avant-garde and give a brief account of how this concept is present in Chinese art from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. My aim is not to supplant the insights of the Chinese scholars and others previously considered but to augment their analysis with a closer look at the process that underlies the avant-garde in both Western and Chinese cultures.

The main task will be to examine the role of improvisation as the core of aesthetic avant-garde art and the emergence of experimental art and relate this concept to developments in Western and Chinese art. Improvisation challenges, and seeks to replace existing hierarchal systems of artistic creation. It offers new concepts including the concept of open form. Open form invites change and offers the possibility of replacing the repetition of traditional forms and preset structures. Understood in this context, improvisation is a means of suppressing historical consciousness. In suppressing historical consciousness, avant-garde practices serve to break the chain of reliance on existing artistic, and thus encourage the discovery of new ideas. With improvisation, there is the hope that artists will discover what could not be found in merely relying on existing artistic practices. Experimentation as it applies here involved not only an invention of new media and styles but also involves rethinking of the forms and locations of exhibitions and sites for artistic

¹³ Wu Hung, "Exhibiting Experimental Art in China," *Fathom Archive: University of Chicago Library Digital Collection*, <http://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/1/777777122473>.

¹⁴ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde in Twentieth Century Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 8, 9.

production as well as their roles. As well, the avant-garde calls for rethinking the fundamental questions about art education and the role of art in society.

My view of the avant-garde in its historic role and in its contemporary applications, thus embraces both its aesthetics of innovation and experimentation, *and* its role as an agent of radical social change. In these respects, the concept of the artistic avant-garde is not limited to a particular period of art history, or to a particular culture. I propose the view that the avant-garde in both its aesthetic and social senses is a recurring phenomenon throughout the history of art, beginning at least in the nineteenth century with the possibility of even earlier moments of experiment and change that might qualify as avant-garde. In any event, it continues to recur throughout history when innovation in artistic concepts, or in the technology necessary to implement them is developed. In some circumstances, major social changes such as globalization call for new art that challenges and seeks to replace existing art. Such developments may even demand reexamination of the connections of art to changes in the social and political environment, as we have seen in China throughout the past century.

While Western Modernism represents an important historical context for understanding one stage of the avant-garde, it does not define how its future manifestations will take place. Hence, the avant-garde neither begins nor ends with Western Modernism, although Modernism provides for one of its important showings. Yet it is possible to understand modernity in a different sense, as Gao Minglu has proposed, focusing on art in a particular time, place, and understanding. In any event, openness to the dialectic between the art of the past and new art is important to understanding the transitions that take place as avant-garde art moves from one stage of a culture to another, or to another culture.

From the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, aesthetic and social avant-garde developments originating in Western societies have served as the background necessary for identifying and assessing the emergence of avant-garde art in China. Yet, as we have seen in the previous section, developments in China itself offer their own social and political environments for determining particular manifestations of the avant-garde. Allowing for these cultural differences and temporal contexts, it appears that avant-garde efforts represent an important part of the history of Chinese art.

Given the presence of well-established traditional Chinese artistic practices such as calligraphy and brush and ink painting based on copying master artists, it may come as a surprise to find such a strong art presence based on avant-garde practices. Training of artists in the major Chinese art academies in the twenty-first century still includes learning traditional Chinese art techniques. And their use often extends into contemporary art practices.

On the other hand, the works of Individualist artists of the seventeenth century such as Ch'ing dynasty artists Tao Chi [Shih-t'ao] Kun-ts'an, Yun Shou 'ing, and Chu Ta [Pa-tashan-jen] (1626 ca.-1705) suggest that not all artists were content to simply copy the masters. A hint of the avant-garde spirit is perhaps expressed in the words of the artists Shih-t'ao and K'un-ts'an, respectively:

I am always myself and must naturally be present in my work. The beards and eyebrows of the masters cannot grow on my face ... I express my own lungs and bowels and show my own beard and eyebrows. If it happens that my work approaches that of some old painter it is he who comes close to me, not I who am imitating him. I have got it by nature and there is no one among the old masters whom I cannot follow and transform.¹⁵ (Shih-t'ao)

The question is how to find peace in a world of suffering. You ask why I came hither. I cannot tell you the reason. I am living high in a tree and looking down. Here I can rest free from all troubles like a bird in its nest. People call me a dangerous man, but I answer 'you are like devils'.¹⁶ (K'un-ts'an)

A cursory look at traditional Chinese landscapes, as well as scrolls featuring fish, flower, bird and rock paintings of the seventeenth century by artists referred to as the Individualists (Shih-t'ao Tao Chi [Shih-t'ao] Kun-ts'an, Yun Shou 'ing, and Chu Ta [Pa-tashan-jen) offers evidence that innovative experimentation has existed in Chinese art well before the twentieth century. Experiments of these artists with brush work, color, expression of emotion, and abstraction, as well as shifting attitudes toward painting, point toward challenges to the artistic conventions of their traditional predecessors. Although aware of tradition, the Individualist artists chose to use tradition with originality and freedom, and to depart from it in their own development. Their rebellion against traditional painting of the master painters was mainly aesthetic, consisting of stylistic innovations. However, artists such as Shih-t'ao and Bada shan ren (Pa-ta-shan-jen) also signaled their societal discontent by adopting the lives of monks.

In any event, their collective aesthetic and societal differences with respect to tradition were apparently sufficient to warrant near exclusion from official imperial collections of the new dynasty.¹⁷ From these examples it is not possible to attribute to earlier developments in Chinese art a fully developed case for the avant-garde prior to the end of the nineteenth century. However, there are at least symptoms of the spirit of avant-garde practices, both aesthetic and social, in these artists' work and lives as noted.

The participation of Chinese artists in avant-garde activities from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present is more complex. Important considerations affecting the development of avant-garde art include both developments within China's culture and history and the external influences of art in the West. On a philosophical level, Chan Buddhism shares with the avant-garde a symphonious world view. In mainland China, Chan Buddhism "encourages an ironic sensibility

¹⁵ Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), 115.

¹⁶ Sherman, *Chinese Landscape Painting*, 115.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115-125.

and denies the privilege of any one doctrine in the search for enlightenment".¹⁸ By emphasizing the process of *becoming* instead of *being*, Chan Buddhism approaches art from the perspective of constant change.¹⁹ This attitude essentially frees the artist's mind from attachment to any particular tradition in art and creates a natural receptivity to innovation and change characteristic of the avant-garde.

Another factor internal to China is the dramatic changes taking place in the social and political climate. As the Imperial system of governance ended and a new republic was established in 1911 by Sun Yat-Sen and his followers, the call for reform in the social and political system was accompanied by the demand for a new art of the people. The spirit of the reformers with respect to literature is expressed in the words of Chen Duxin, newly appointed dean of the college of letters at Beijing University in 1917: "I am willing to brave the enmity of all the pedantic scholars of the country" ... in support of revolutionary principles aimed at destroying aristocratic literature in favor of a "plain and simple expressive literature of the people" based on realism.²⁰ A similar radical view on behalf of the visual arts is reflected in the words of Lin Fengman, a progressive artist and arts educator in an address to The Great Beijing Art Meeting in 1927:

Down with the tradition of copying!
 Down with the art of the aristocratic minority!
 Down with the antisocial art that is divorced from the masses!
 Up with the creative art that represents the times!
 Up with art that can be shared with all of the people!
 Up with the people's art that stands at the crossroads!²¹

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

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

18 Gao Minglu, "Conceptual Art with anti-conceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, exhibition catalogue (Queens Museum of New York, 1999), 127.

19 Kenneth K. Inada, "The Buddhist Aesthetic Nature: A Challenge to Rationalism and Empiricism," *Asian Philosophy*, 4, no. 2 (1994). See also Gao Jianping, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art: From Calligraphy to Painting* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Aesthetica Upsaliensis 7, 1996), 192.

20 Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), 33.

21 Meishu (1986:4) 64 n.2 Cited in Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 44.

Japanese artists in adapting Western art to Asian culture, attracted many Chinese painters to study in Japan as well as with Japanese teachers imported to teach art in China.

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

Gao Jianfu's art was influential in the advancement of Western art ideas among other Chinese artists of the period. His aim was to create a new pictorial language for Chinese art based on a synthesis of Chinese and Western art. His approach involved attending to portrait painting, lighting and shade, and linear perspective found in Western art and applying these elements to Chinese brush strokes, composition, inking, coloring in the manner of the literati tradition of painting.²² In an effort to make the art comprehensible to the masses he focused on contemporary themes from everyday life.

Gao Jianfu's approach looked beyond painting itself to the improvement of human nature and the betterment of society. He believed that traditional painting failed in all of its social functions except for serving an elite few scholars and the literate aristocracy.²³ His intent was to challenge and replace traditional art with art that would serve to reform the thought patterns of persons at every level of society. This meant replacing reflective, poetic scroll paintings and poems with art that embraces both Chinese and Western pictorial elements and is visually attractive, attention getting, and containing an element of shock. One of Gao Jianfu's paintings, *Flying in the Rain* (1932) portrays a squadron of biplanes over a misty ink wash landscape with a pagoda in the background. The painting is executed on a Chinese scroll and is said to have been based on sketches made from an airplane. Viewing the landscape from an airplane view would have been a daring perch for a painter in the early age of aviation in the late 1920s.²⁴

Such a painting would have no doubt been anathema to the literati painters of

22 Christina Chu, "The Lingnan School and Its Followers: Radical Innovations in Southern China," in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China*, eds. Julia F. Anderson and Kuiyi Shen (New York: Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 1998), 68.

23 In contrast to Gao Jianfu's revolutionary approach to art, intent on making art accessible to the people, the aristocratic tradition limited access to famous paintings based on social standing. Viewing important works of art was considered a "limited and intense" social experience with rules and prescriptions on how to visualize or contemplate the art. See Craig Clunas, *Pictures and visibility in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1997), 112, 114-117.

24 Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 52-55.

the period.²⁵ Opponents of change did not consider the new art based on Western art ideas as art at all, in the sense of Chinese traditional art. Rather, Western based art was initially considered in the category of "maps, charts, mechanical, and geometric drawings apart from art".²⁶

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

Given the state of Chinese art at the beginning of the twentieth century, the New National Art (xin guohua) of the Lingnan School constitutes an important stage in the development of the Chinese aesthetic avant-garde. Moreover, this new art functioned as a means of revolutionary social change aimed at changing the existing state of Manchu society. In this respect, it also qualifies as an example of the social avant-garde as explained earlier.

In what sense do the changes initiated by the Lingnan School warrant the label avant-garde? Not all of the changes in the art of China during this era would necessarily qualify as innovations of style when seen initially from the perspective of a Western observer. For example, it could be argued that the introduction of Western realism into Chinese painting draws upon an existing painting style and techniques previously developed in the West. In this respect, Gao Jianfu's art is based on the appropriation of existing techniques from western art and also from Chinese traditional art. However, appropriation is one of the recognized means of introducing avant-garde transitions into art both in the West and in China. As used here, the concept of appropriation refers to the practice of taking over existing concepts, images, or means of production and using them for artistic purposes in another context. For example, Picasso uses African tribal images in developing his own, what was then considered avant-garde art. As well, appropriation is an acknowledged practice in Western postmodern art of the late twentieth century. Chinese traditional artists also freely appropriate images from earlier master artists in their own art. However, when viewed in the context of traditional Chinese art, the introduction of art based on a merging of elements of Western and Chinese art constitutes a radical, avant-garde shift in the understanding of what could be considered art.

25 Michael Sullivan, who admits his antipathy to the Lingnan art, believes that the school was based on a misconception of the nature and purpose of art, in its lack of passion for form. He argues that the Lingnan movement was limited in its influence because of anti-japanese feeling in China based on aggression toward China and its location in Guangdong Province out of the main centers in Shanghai and Beijing. See Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 57.

26 Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 32.

Finally it is useful to look briefly at the types of changes that globalization and the emergence of the avant-garde brought to Chinese art. In his book, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, Michael Sullivan describes the rift between the new art and traditional art in these words:

The revolution in Chinese twentieth century art most profound in its implications for the future was not the introduction of new media and styles, or even the change from conventionalization to realism, but the questioning – and for many total abandonment – of the traditional Chinese belief that the purposes of art were to express the ideal of harmony between man and nature, to uphold tradition, and to give pleasure.²⁷

Perhaps one of the outcomes of the avant-garde art in China is a shift from harmony between man and nature to social harmony where art is linked to all aspects of life including the political.

The type of Western influences Chinese artists chose to bring back to China based on their experiences in Paris and elsewhere varied considerably. For example, Xu Beihong (1895–1953) favored a conservative eighteenth century romantic realism. He used it to create landscape and portrait paintings in opposition to the modernist influences.²⁸ Mayching Kao, another Chinese artist working in Paris in the early part of the twentieth century, saw many options including “the individual styles of Manet, Monet, Cezanne, van Gogh, Derain and Vlaminck ... as a repertoire from which to pick and choose.”²⁹ Among the options were a range of then avant-garde styles – Post-impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Dada – all at work changing the course of Western traditional art. Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), chose to follow the modernists Matisse and Modigliani in bringing avant-garde modernism to China.

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

The first official National Art Exhibition of 1929 featuring Western influenced avant-garde was held in Shanghai and opened to mixed reviews. Similarly, the 1935 NOVA exhibition of the China Independent Art Association with paintings by Chinese, Japanese and other artists inspired by the Fauve and Surrealist movements

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

²⁸ See Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), 59, 71, 72; Kuiyi Shen, “The Lure of the West,” in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China*, eds. Julia F. Anderson and Kuiyi Shen (New York: Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 1998), 177, 178.

²⁹ Mayching Kao, “The Beginning of Western-style Painting Movement in Relationship to Reforms of Education in early Twentieth-Century China,” *New Asia Academic Bulletin* 4 (1983): 99.

was roundly criticized in the press, and ended NOVA. However, the editor of *Yifeng magazine* featured the exhibition and included a copy of André Breton's *Manifesto of 1924*.

Despite these and other scattered efforts to establish the avant-garde, the challenges of absorbing the changes mandated by Western Realism, let alone the various Western avant-garde movements that questioned traditional Western Realism, proved daunting. As Michael Sullivan has noted, without the support of scholarship, poetry and the literary culture on which traditional Chinese art was based, individual Chinese artists found difficulty in establishing their own way to create art in the new styles. Opening up of the subjects of painting beyond "agreeable or symbolic themes" grounded in social and aesthetic harmony created major problems for the Chinese artists. For example, nude models and the nude as subject were particularly uncomfortable for Chinese artists and art consumers. These factors and a general lack of support for Western innovations in Chinese culture thus hindered the development of a vigorous avant-garde.³⁰ Add to these considerations the fact that some Chinese critics such as Chen Yifan believed that modern avant-garde art must be inspired by a revolutionary democratic nationalism capable of advancing the social and political aims of China.³¹ It was not immediately clear to Chinese engaged in the challenges of forging a new China and dealing with the Japanese occupation how the Paris avant-garde suited the aims of the social revolution taking place in China.

The story of globalization and the avant-garde continues through the period of the Cultural Revolution but with a different focus. Western influences apart from those ensuing from Russian Socialist Realism were temporarily deterred. It was not until the 1980s that globally inspired avant-garde art was again able to proceed with a greater openness. In the interim, some Chinese artists chose exile as a means of developing their art, but many remained in China and continued to explore the possibilities opened up by globalization and the avant-garde. These developments are a story for another occasion.

This brief look at the influences of globalization on the development of the avant-garde in Chinese art touches in a preliminary way on strengths and limits of global influences in the art of a particular culture. In this respect, China represents a highly developed, rich and complex art culture that is undergoing the forces of massive change internally while attempting to absorb the forces brought about by globalization. This investigation into the topic suggests that global intervention in this instance has served as a catalyst for change enabling the advancement of avant-garde aspects of Chinese art long before the more obvious developments after the Cultural Revolution and policy changes after 1980. The resulting changes in Chinese art are a product of globalizing forces working in relation to already existing strengths based on a long history of Chinese art. Existing strengths in Chinese

30 Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 66.

31 Che'en I-Fan, "The Modern Trend in Contemporary Chinese Art," *T'ien Hsia Monthly* (January 1937): 47. Also cited in Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 67.

culture and art provide a strong foundation able to accept new ideas from outside while remaining focused on the integrity of existing Chinese art traditions. The creative involvement of global forces from the West has undoubtedly strengthened the position of Chinese art worldwide, both in aesthetic and economic terms.

Not all Chinese avant-garde artists today fit easily into the categories noted here linking art to social or political objectives. Rather, like their seventeenth century Chinese ancestors (Shih-t'ao and K'un-ts'an), and their European avant-garde predecessors whose main concern was with the aesthetic, a notable portion of today's artists look inward to the subjective as the source of their avant-garde expressions. These artists focus their creative output on "more personal aesthetic characteristics" concerned with self-esteem and possibly spiritual autonomy as a wedge against oppressive societal struggles. Artists today do not shy away from externalizing these concerns through performance art using the body and expressions of violence to address a wide range of concerns that bear on the meaning of humanity.³² Others focus their contributions to avant-garde art on the aesthetic aspects of art itself.

The effects of globalization and avant-garde art on Chinese art continue to evolve. Chinese avant-garde art has become a topic of interest in the main press as well as for scholarly investigations. An article titled, "The Avant-garde goes too Far?" in the March 4, 2012 issue of *China Daily* contains an ambiguity in its message. The title of the article raises the question of limits for the avant-garde, while the article focuses on increasing government tolerance of nudity, abstract art, literary erotica, and rock and roll music, perhaps signaling a greater tolerance of creative freedom.³³ With the continuing development of Chinese avant-garde today, the emphasis is increasingly on finding ways to ground the art in Chinese history and culture while absorbing the innovative spirit and practices from the West. At the center of such developments are perhaps conflicting aims that emerge from a century of developments in Chinese avant-garde art. On the one hand, there is the ongoing utopian element that aspires to link art and politics with the aim of advancing the unification of culture and the betterment of society. On the other hand, the range of creative expression suggests a flourishing array of innovation, while protest against constraints on freedom of expression and the commodification of art remain on-going concerns for avant-garde artists.

One prospective outcome for Chinese art is the likelihood to find Beijing in the position to host the title of world art capitol, thus replacing New York, Paris, and Rome as previous contenders.

32 Ly Peng, Zhu Zhu, Kao Chienhui, eds., *Thirty Years of Adventures: Art and Artists from 1979* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2011), 149, 175-178.

33 Melinda Liu, "The Avant-garde goes too Far," *China Daily*, March 4 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-08/02/content_356928.htm.