

Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu
**From the Issue
of Art to the
Issue of
Position: The
Echoes of
Socialist
Realism, Part I**

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e-flux journal #55 — may 2014 Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu
From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part I

Socialist Realism was introduced into China in the first half of the twentieth century, and gradually became the main, overarching creative method of the revolutionary era, leading art, literature, theater, and other creative fields for decades. It is often seen as a highly politicized creative model that is the product of socialist, and particularly communist, political views. Over the past three decades, contemporary artists and art discussions often attempted to cast it off as an external form, positioning themselves in opposition to it in order to declare their independent, rebellious, free, and contemporary stance in their artistic practice. Many artists and critics have also engaged in a conscious rethinking of their socialist heritage within their artistic practice, either distancing themselves or avoiding it altogether, unwilling to admit Socialism's direct connection to contemporary times as an artistic tradition or ideology. Such an independent, rebellious, and free stance appears to be the foundation of the contemporary legitimacy of art. At the same time, we have not engaged in adequate observation and discussion of its internal logic. The current ambiguity of articulation concerning contemporary issues in art criticism in China is largely due to the delay in carrying out deep research and analysis of this historical process. In this paper, we propose to address the subject of socialist realism as a fundamental issue, exploring the historic practice and complexity of its formation.

The Origins of Social Realism

Engels predicted in 1859 that socialist literature would possess profound conceptual and predictive abilities, as well as a perfected artistic form. He believed that realism “implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.” That is to say, art reflects generalized reality rather than solely and simply a mimetic reproduction of a particular reality. It is a depiction that presupposes historical development and class struggle so as to “lay claim to a place in the realm of realism.” Socialist Realism is socialist first, not realist. The intellectuals, writers, and artists who were entrusted with the duty of changing and educating the working class had to accept communist utopia as the ultimate truth as well as the inevitability of the revolution. Once both were accepted, then romanticization, with its embellishment and exaggeration of heroes and various beautiful imaginings, would not be fabrication but an actual reflection of a reality to come.

As a creative method, Socialist Realism was not just a Soviet invention promoted by the Communist Party. Early in the twentieth century,



Wu Yinxian, *Hainan Province*, 1976. Image courtesy of Wu Wei.

progressive intellectuals introduced realism into the field of literature, its sense of intimacy attracting many authors engaged in the fields of literature, drama, and art. For some, realism in China allowed for an escape from Western invasion and appealed to Chinese national values, including its culture. Others saw Western modern art as reflecting the modernization of the nation and a way to help overcome its feudalist structure. These complex, intertwined sentiments of admiration and hatred for Western nations – as both industrialized states and colonialists – filled the Chinese intellectual realm. Socialist Realism appeared within this context and appealed to Chinese artists' aspirations for the modernization of art. For intellectuals, it had a sense of presence in reality, and this in itself already proved quite alluring. Meanwhile, it fit with their deep desire to integrate their own ideals with their pursuit of change in reality and progress for the nation. An early definition of Socialist Realism accounted for this precedence, stating that Socialist Realism emerged

between 1932 and 1934 in the discussion of creative methods among artists and writers in the Soviet Union, proposed by writers and theorists and agreed upon by Stalin. Though the Socialist Realist creative method was established in the 1930s, its basic traits had already taken shape in the creative practices of some writers before it was theoretically defined.¹

In Russia, the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 established Socialist Realism as the main creative style for Soviet literature, noting that the artist must not just understand life as an “objective reality” but also a reality within the developments of the revolution. On this occasion, Maxim Gorky stated that Socialist Realist literature was directly connected to the proletariat, and its ascension in world history as an independent political force. Hence, British Chartist poetry, German proletarian poetry, and the French literature of the Paris Commune were to be located as the beginnings of this new literary form, which had to wait until the first Russian revolution to be able to affirm itself as the mature phase of this proletarian revolution.

The Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art

The Communist Party of China was established in 1921 as a branch of the Communist International founded by Lenin in 1919, with initial funding and guidance from the latter. A fracture arose when the Central Committee, controlled by personnel sent over by the

Communist International, demanded that the Chinese Communist Party's struggles use Soviet tactics and directly serve the Soviet Union. When war broke out between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1941, the Soviet Union was too preoccupied to manage the affairs of the Chinese Communist Party and its Red Army, controlled by Mao Zedong and other local cadres. Mao Zedong took this opportunity to attack the internationalists within the party, led by Wang Ming, and coin a local Marxism – a “proletarian party” free from the control of the Soviet Union. The Communist Party of China was transformed from a subsidiary organization of the Communist International into a tight-knit, autonomous party with a solidified role for art and literature in its political policies.

After these developments, the Chinese Communist Party carried out party-wide Marxism-Leninism pedagogic movements in 1942, 1950, and 1957 to solidify Mao's absolute leadership. As an important component of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, Mao personally hosted the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art from May 2 to 23, 1942. Over a hundred art and literary workers as well as officials from various departments of the party attended. The objective was to resolve the theoretical and practical issues that Chinese proletarian art and literature had encountered in its development, including the relation of the artwork to the overall work of the party, its public and its dissemination, as well as the unification of content and form, of praise and exposure. Mao Zedong's opening and closing remarks that May were combined and officially published on October 19, 1943 in the Yan'an newspaper *Liberation Daily*, marking the beginning of the new era of integration between new Chinese literature and the worker-peasant-soldier masses.

In the *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art*, Mao proposed:

The life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials for literature and art, materials in their natural form, materials that are crude, but most vital, rich and fundamental; they make all literature and art seem pallid by comparison; they provide literature and art with an inexhaustible source, their only source. They are the only source, for there can be no other.²

This exposition has determined our later narrowness as we view contemporary art. Like Mao's absoluteness in the orthodoxy of the Communist Party's ruling and ideology in China, there is a tendency to exclude any different perspective and to recognize only one legitimate



12 千年土地翻了身 (水粉画)

Dong Xiwen, *Thousand-year Old Earth has Turned Over*, date unknown. Watercolor. This plate is extracted from the book *Views on the Route of Long March*, 1958.

form, approach, and value, giving no space at all to diversions and differences. In the case of defining what is realist art for the Chinese art world, we often fall into the same logic of singularity, taking the biased view that content is the only testament to the continuation of the creative traditions of realism, while overlooking creations that engage in experiments with other aspects of a broader sense of realism.

Meanwhile, we narrowly define reality as that reality which exists before the eyes and in the lives of the masses. Despite the fact that the reality depicted by Socialist Realism actually includes subjective ideas and faces the so-called reality of communist ideals, Socialist Realism as a creative approach is far less definite than we have estimated and previously understood. Bureaucracy and censorship, as well as the resulting artistic views that arose in the 1940s around the principle that art should serve politics, have proven much more stable. After several decades of security, the various operations – from policies on art to art patronage projects, the Artist’s Association, the National Fine Arts Exhibitions, sponsorship, the censorship regime, and the art museum system – formed an unshakeable inertia. The art and discussions of art cultivated within this system have come to occupy more widely disseminated fields such as textbooks, mass media, and museums.

The *Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art* stressed:

All our literature and art is for the masses of the people, and in the first place for the workers, peasants and soldiers; it is created for the workers, peasants and soldiers ... Once we have solved the problems of fundamental policy, of serving the workers, peasants and soldiers and of how to serve them, such other problems as whether to write about the bright or the dark side of life and the problem of unity will also be solved. If everyone agrees on the fundamental policy, it should be adhered to by all our workers, all our schools, publications and organizations in the field of literature and art and in all our literary and artistic activities. It is wrong to depart from this policy and anything at variance with it must be duly corrected.³

This talk was established as the sole source for artistic and literary creation. It resulted in top-down orders that colluded to limit artistic creation to a narrow framework at the service of ideology, and determined that the ensuing artworks should, in content and form, be easy to disseminate. In the *Talks*, Mao particularly

emphasized the “question of who art and literature is for,” pointing out that literature “consists fundamentally of the problems of working for the masses and how to work for the masses.” The reading public was endowed with intangible political rights and critical authority. Consequently, publications established sections for “letters from readers,” turning readers into important writers of art criticism, making for a unique critical method in magazines such as *Fine Arts (Meishu)*.



Wu Yinxian, *Hainan Province*, 1976. Image courtesy of Wu Wei.

Dong Xiwen and Wu Yinxian and the Beginning of Realism in China

Let us look back again on the early days of realism’s introduction into China. Its artistic properties held a strong appeal for the intellectuals, writers, and artists of the day. As the revolution progressed and the Communist Party further defined Socialist Realism, it gradually evolved from an artistic style into an ideology with clear viewpoints. It was the clothing of ideology, as well as ideology itself. This transformation of its role was total, because it began expressing powerful exclusivity and producing confusion. In order to fit with the political mode it represented, it not only expressed the ideology it represented, but also became that ideology itself, consolidating the

mechanisms of that ideology. It put on its poker face, equating itself with correctness and singularity, through which it gained absolute authority. This is why the question of right and wrong began to emerge in these creations, with political views, goals, and functions coming to occupy the leading position in these creations. Creation itself began to follow political guidance. Its boundaries grew increasingly visible, and like a talisman, they came to regulate and define the range of artists' thoughts and creations.

Today, most accounts of people like Wu Yinxian and Dong Xiwen go only as far as the political foundations of their creations, treating their work the same as that which purely served ideological ends. Few of Wu Yinxian's contemporaries or successors had such a rich early education in Eastern and Western art, nor did they establish their later work on an artistic foundation – instead treating photography as a political task, an operation for the expression of political intentions. Even today, most photography services are run by photojournalists or even sports photographers. To summarily relegate the work of such artists as Wu Yinxian and Dong Xiwen to the category of ideological tools is to fall into the same absolutist and simplified approach to understanding as is

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applied in Socialist Realism.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the literary and art workers streaming into Beijing from the liberated zones brought revolutionary artistic ideas to the capital. In the spirit of the times, Socialist Realist painting came to carry the idea of the "nationalization of oil painting" advocated by many artists in the early days of the People's Republic, allowing this European art form to constitute the most convincing medium for its entry into the realm of Chinese art at the service of political ends. The artists steeped in early Western modernism found political momentum for turning what they learned abroad into something Chinese. Placed on important platforms, they were, on the one hand, considered within the ideological framework. On the other, they were also able to refine and ponder artistic practice itself.

Dong Xiwen, for instance, became a household name in China in the 1950s and '60s for his oil painting *The Founding of a Nation*. Although he did not study abroad in Europe, Dong spent time in French-ruled Vietnam, where he studied at a French art academy. Between 1943 and '45, Dong researched and copied the art of Dunhuang, whose depictions of the human



Dong Xiwen, *Jia Ling River in Chong Qing*, date unknown. Oil on canvas. This plate is extracted from the book *Views on the Route of Long March*, 1958.

form he “highly praised, ... seeing the artists’ great ability to render smooth flesh and elastic color tones with simple lines and colors as worthy of admiration.”⁴ From the murals at Dunhuang he absorbed the aesthetics of traditional painting, and learned the traditional modeling techniques that were to constitute his aesthetics:

Through his research of the murals, Dong Xiwen deepened his understanding of the traditional art of his people, laying the foundation for his reverence for ethnic culture. It was this reverence that led him, when studying foreign oil painting, to consciously infuse oil painting with the forms and spirit of Chinese art, giving oil painting a Chinese style and artistic spirit.⁵

Though there was overlap between Dong Xiwen’s pursuit of the “nationalization of oil painting” and the Communist Party’s demands that literary and artistic creation fall into the service of politics, the artist’s individual practice was not always entirely in accord with the nation’s political standards. In “Self-Examination,” published in *Fine Art Research*, Dong Xiwen confronted the influence of Western art forms and problematized his previous emphasis on style, individuality, and emotion. He wrote,

Though I criticize recent European painting schools such as Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, when I saw the original works, I was full of uncontrollable excitement. When the “double-anti” campaign began ... I suddenly saw the capitalist artistic path I had taken over a decade ago, and that I still continued to follow. In the relationship between conceptuality and form, and on the question of political standards and artistic standards, I used the emphasis on formal appeal to dilute the primacy of the former. These capitalist views on art, still strong today, are clearly at odds with Chairman Mao’s path for literature and the arts, and Socialist Realism’s creative path.⁶

The late historian Gao Hua wrote that China’s real proletarian cultural narrative was spread to China from Moscow and Japan. The narrative of class struggle emphasizes imperialism’s suppression of and encroachment into China and the Chinese people’s painful memories of it, while also providing an idealist vision for changing society. In theory, it is called communism, but in practice, it is actually “Soviet,” and that was basically the case for the left wing for ten years (1927–1937). Into the

1930s, the left wing added another appealing banner: “resisting Japan for national survival,” infusing the leftist revolutionary narrative with nationalist elements. From that perspective, the left occupied moral high ground in two places: anti-imperialist patriotism and egalitarianism.

Before 1949, leftist culture occupied a large space in Chinese intellectual consciousness precisely for these two reasons.⁷ China also had its own background, the tradition of “writing as the carrier of the truth,” a tradition of changing society through literature. In the early twentieth century, there was just such a movement for literature and art’s intervention and participation in social reform. The years 1927 to 1937 were China’s “red thirties,” a decade of literature and art intervening in society and social reform, when many writers and artists entered more directly into the social revolution. Born to a scholarly family in Shuyang County, Jiangsu Province, Wu Yinxian enjoyed a rich artistic upbringing. In 1919, he was accepted into the Shanghai Professional Academy for Fine Arts, a school founded by Liu Haisu, where he received standard training in the fundamentals of painting. During his studies, he bought an old American Brownie camera at a secondhand market, and began to use photography and film to document the suppression of the poor by the rich, the warlords, and the Japanese invaders.

In March 1933, the Chinese Communist Party Cultural Council established an underground film group run by Xia Yan, Qian Xingcun, Wang Chenwu, Shi Linghe, and Situ Huimin. They began contacting progressives in hopes of producing an anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist film for the masses and making use of realist expressive methods. In an atmosphere of unprecedented anti-Japanese sentiments and a surging patriotic movement, they firmly established the Communist Party’s status as the spokesman for the growing dissatisfaction.

In 1935, after Wu Yinxian and Xu Xingzhi’s work was displayed at the *Photography and Painting Exhibition*, Xia Yan approached Xu Xingzhi, suggesting that both photographers move from Unique Film Productions to the Diantong Film Company to film the movie *Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm*, with a script by Tian Han. Wu Yinxian accepted, and worked as the film’s cinematographer. Set against the backdrop of the Mukden Incident of 1931, it tells the story of an intellectual’s progression from hesitation to awakened struggle and revolution through the story of wandering poet Xin Baihua, reflecting the popular will to resist the Japanese invasion. *Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm* was Wu Yinxian’s first work as a filmmaker, and was also:

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3 春到西藏 (油画)

Dong Xiwen, *Spring Arrives in Tibet*, date unknown. Oil on canvas. This plate is extracted from the book *Views on the Route of Long March*, 1958.

An important part of Wu Yinxian's transformation. He began the shift from being a patriotic youth with a sense of justice and national awareness to gradually realizing that only by throwing himself into the torrents of the people's movement could he carry out his responsibilities to his people and society.⁸

In the filming process, Wu Yinxian "pondered Xia Yan's words, and came to feel the weight of his responsibility."⁹

After this, Wu Yinxian filmed *Street Angel* and the documentary *Long Live China*, which criticized China's social inequality and praised the Chinese Revolutionary Forces in their efforts to resist the Japanese and save China. Nationalist Party censors derided *Long Live China* as "communist propaganda," and destroyed all the negatives and copies – no footage of this film survives today. In the summer of 1938, Deputy Communist Party Military Commissioner Zhou Enlai invited Yuan Mu to travel to Yan'an, the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border area, and the Northern China Rear Guard Zone to film a documentary on the Eighth Route Army under the command of the Communist Party. Yuan invited Wu Yinxian, who arrived in Yan'an in the fall of 1938, planning to return to Shanghai after filming on *Yan'an and the Eighth Route Army* was complete. But he was touched by the life of battle in the revolutionary stronghold, and decided to stay, joining the Communist Party in 1942 and continuing to work in party-related films, reflecting the political, economic, and cultural life in Yan'an. During these eight years, Wu Yinxian merged with his subjects, facing the tests of battle alongside those he photographed. Deeply influenced by Marxism, Leninism, and Maoist thought, he transformed from a progressive leftist youth into a "proletarian warrior who struggled for the photographic endeavors of the party with staunch resolution." He founded the Northeastern Film Studio, and in the subsequent decades worked in the field and wrote a nearly one-million-word theoretical treatise on photography that became an important manual for the theory and practice of photography.

In 1955, Wu Yinxian travelled to Beijing to take part in the creation of China's first higher education institution for film, the Beijing film Academy, where he served as deputy director and directed the photography department. When the Cultural Revolution began, Wu Yinxian and his fellow cultural workers were no longer able to openly engage in education and photography. He was required to take part in labor activities and write reports on his thinking. In 1969, Wu Yinxian

wrote a letter to Jiang Qing, hoping to gain the right to continue working:

Comrade Jiang Qing: I would also like to report a personal matter. Though I am old, and unable to carry heavy cameras myself, I am free of disease, have good blood pressure and an overall healthy body. I very much hope to contribute my personal abilities to your filming of the revolutionary model operas, for instance helping the photography comrades, and exploring such aspects as composition, camera movement and lighting. I also hope that through my participation in the filming of the model operas, I can raise my own political awareness, becoming someone who can do more beneficial work for the party in the future.¹⁰

In the later years of the Cultural Revolution, Wu Yinxian became one of the first academy administrative cadre members to be released from manual labor and suspension from work. At Jiang Qing's request, the Beijing Film Academy and other art academies were dismantled, and the 57 Art Academy was built, with Wu Yinxian serving as deputy director. Because of this experience, Wu Yinxian was not immediately rehabilitated at the end of the Cultural Revolution, unlike many of his peers who had been mistreated during that period, and his position was not restored until he wrote a letter to Hu Yaobang explaining his situation.

In *Unstoppable Concern: Intellectual Life and Politics Before and After 1949*, Yang Kuisong writes,

In the recent era, Chinese political change has always begun in a violent fashion. Into the twentieth century, it became even more of a violent seizure of political power. Thus, gun barrels, rather than pens, became the main determining political means.

Within this brutal political reality and political logic, Wu Yinxian and other intellectuals and artists had to choose their areas, and to carry out their work in ways that politically benefitted those fields. Their work and values were often covered over by their political standpoints – examined and observed through the logic of revolutionary thinking. Even today, their creative achievements are overlooked and they are shunned according to the revolutionary values that still course through the blood of the majority of people.

Still, Wu Yinxian, who was present at the Yan'an Conference and filmed the proceedings, never forgot in his later practice Mao Zedong's

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exhortation to serve the people with art. After Yan'an, he always played a principle role in the party's film and photography endeavors. His artistic insight, his research on the theory and practice of photography, never became dogmatic, mechanical, or devoid of his own viewpoints. To the contrary, the artist's early education in Shanghai and his own independent studies retained their relevance.

A look at Dong Xiwen and Wu Yinxian reminds us that in approaching the creations of this period, we should not overlook the complexity of the creators while looking at the goals and viewpoints of these creations. Even when engaging in creations to carry out political tasks, there was still a dynamism to the art and thinking, and artists were able to exercise a certain amount of subjectivity. Even if the artist as an individual was working to express the political authority he served, his artistic experiences and aspirations still played a role in his work. In their creative processes, their pursuit of diversity in artistic forms and artistic tastes often clashed and contradicted with the powerful constraints placed on art by the political structure of the times, and these real experiences, the struggles and reflections of the artists within this process, and the results that

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emerged from these competing forces, came to form our experience of the artistic creations of the era. Within the internal party mechanisms for controlling speech and ideas, self-examination and self-criticism are highly effective methods. For instance, in "Self-Examination," Dong Xiwen wrote,

The political and artistic aspects of art should be unified, nevertheless, political standards should come first, but in the question of conceptual and artistic, political standards and artistic standards, I still place great emphasis on the latter, while merely paying lip service to the former. Though I say that I believe the direction of Socialist Realism to be the correct one, I have always felt that our average artworks are monotonous in style and lacking in form, rarely possessing the personality and emotions of the artist.

Dong Xiwen used writing, teaching in the academy, and presenting artworks to continue progressing and practicing artistic experimentation in this political atmosphere and sense of self-contradiction, and thus added to the formation of artistic discourse. Around the



Wu Yinxian, *Island Militias*, 1976.
Image courtesy of Wu Wei.

time of the nation's founding, the goals and directions of artists' work were the same as those of the ruling party, full of duty and hope for the rise of the nation, and the pursuit of the modernization of art. In later years, even as individual artistic pursuits fell under government suspicion and became the target of criticism, the relationship between these individual artists and the government was an internal one. They never became opposing camps pursuing different political ends. Throughout this time, the government hoped to limit the boundaries of art and ideas, while the artists, in their work, always hoped to gain more, and because of this, they often collided with the limits of government tolerance. This collision was always the result of artistic demands, not political ones. This internal, parallel, but sometimes abrasive relationship can also be used to describe the later relationship between art and government, which was sometimes peaceful and sometimes not so peaceful.

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Discourse

There are several characteristics and issues in our understanding and description of the creative trends that have taken place in Chinese contemporary art over the past thirty years. First, discussion of art has been profoundly shaped by two narrative types that have occupied a definitive position in modern Chinese history. These two narrative types are the "revolutionary narrative" and the "modernization narrative," as described by art historian Gao Hua. Gao has made a profound yet simple analysis of the roots and lasting impact of these narratives:

The so-called "revolutionary narrative" arose from the 1920s to 1940s, and is the revolutionary history of the left. Various "organic" or "organized" new intellectuals such as Qu Qiubai, Zhang Wentian and He Ganzhi imported a series of concepts and categories from new leftist theories in the Soviet Union and Japan, constructing a system for leftist forces to apply to understanding the reality, past and future of China, with the core theme being the legitimacy and inevitability of revolution in China.¹¹

Socialist Realism represents the expressive methods of this system of understanding and interpretation. Gao believes that the "revolutionary narrative," owing to its roots in an era of revolutionary struggle, is marked by strong tones of political mobilization. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the "revolutionary narrative" began a slide towards ossification and dogmatism. The "revolutionary narrative" engaged in an excessive pursuit of a "grand narrative," establishing a standpoint before engaging in research and discussion:

Guided by authoritative descriptions or authoritative documents, it selectively cut and pasted historical material in order to affirm a certain authoritative description, simplifying the complex processes of history into an explanation of "inevitability" while covering over many rich and fresh historical layers.

The other main narrative model in modern history, the "modernization narrative," was introduced into China in the early 1980s. The end of the Cultural Revolution is often viewed as the starting point for contemporary art, and the continued use of this chronology has led to the oversimplification of its complexity. By placing the beginning of Chinese contemporary art in 1976, and by placing contemporary art together with the universally described loosening of the



Dong Xiwen, *Kazak Shepherdess*, date unknown. Oil on canvas. This plate is extracted from the book *Views on the Route of Long March*, 1958.

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social atmosphere, liberation of ideas, and the people's strong desire to escape the past after the end of the Cultural Revolution, contemporary art and the contemporary art field have gradually been turned into symbols, and to a certain extent, this practice has come to hinder creative practitioners and art critics themselves.

This narrative uses the global and universal historical process that is modernization to describe the modernization process that China carried out under strong influence from other countries, using it to expound upon China's experiences and lessons from over a century of modernization. This narrative model views China's recent history through the lens of close connections to the world, and has been applied to Chinese modern and contemporary art, particularly in the description of creative forms and artistic movements from the mid-1980s to the present.

The weakness of this method is that it magnifies the universal applicability of the European and American modernization process, and fails to place the logic of China's own modernization process in the proper light. The limitations of this narrative model led to many anxieties in Chinese culture and art circles in the 1990s regarding China and the West, how to construct a self-oriented history, and how to engage in a suitable self-narrative.

We believe that the trajectory of Chinese contemporary art, from creation to discussion, did not take place entirely removed from Socialist Realism, but that it has continued to follow Socialist Realism and the pursuit of modernity as its evolution was shaped by China's political environment. Describing contemporary art as a "rebellious and progressive" set of ideas and actions is actually in keeping with Socialist Realism's historical demand to present reality in creative work. In existing accounts, contemporary art's birth after 1976 was to become the best "witness" to the openness of communist society, where "dissidents and rebels" had become integrated into the reality of society itself.

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To be continued in "From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part II." This text was translated from the Chinese by Jeff Crosby.

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Liu Ding is an artist and curator based in Beijing. His artistic and curatorial practice treats objects, events, and discourses of art history and the foundation of historicization both as materials and as the basis for critical reflection. He initiated the research and exhibition project titled *Little Movements: Self-practice in Contemporary Art I, II*, in collaboration with Carol Yinghua Lu. He co-curated the 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial, titled *Accidental Message: Art is Not a System, Not a World*. Publications written and edited by him include *Little Movements: Self-practice in Contemporary Art I, II*, *Accidental Message: Art is Not a System, Not a World*, and *Individual Experience: Conversations and Narratives of Contemporary Art Practice in China from 1989 to 2000*.

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1
From the definition of “Socialist Realism” on Baidu Encyclopedia, a collaborative, web-based, Chinese-language encyclopedia <http://baike.baidu.com/>

2
Mao Zedong, *Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art* https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm

3
Ibid.

4
Wan Shaojun, *Youhua Zhongguo Feng – Dong Xiwen Yishu Sixiang yu Chuangzuo Shijian Tixi de Zai Renshi (Oil Painting’s Chinese Style – Reappraising Dong Xiwen’s System of Artistic Ideas and Creative Practices)*, Dong Xiwen Yanjiu Wenji (Collected Research Writings on Dong Xiwen).

5
Ibid.

6
Dong Xiwen, “Ziwo Jiancha (Self-Examination),” *Dong Xiwen Yanjiu Wenji [Collected Research Writings on Dong Xiwen]*, Beijing Academy of Painting. Originally published in *Meishu Yanjiu [Fine Art Research]* vol. 2 (1958): 256–257.

7
Gao Hua, *Geming Niandai (The Years of Revolution)*, fifth printing, first edition (Guangdong: Guangdong Provincial Publishing Group, 2011), 136.

8
Wu Yinxian’s website <http://www.wuyinxian.com>

9
Ibid.

10
Letter from Wu Yinxian to Jiang Qing, July 3, 1969.

11
Gao Hua, *Xushi Shijiao de Duoyangxing yu Dangdaishi Yanjiu: yi 50 Niandai Lishi Yanjiu Wei Lie (Diversity of Narrative Perspective and Contemporary Research: the Case of Historical Research on the 1950s)*, *Geming Niandai (The Years of Revolution)* (Guangdong: People’s Publishing House, 289).