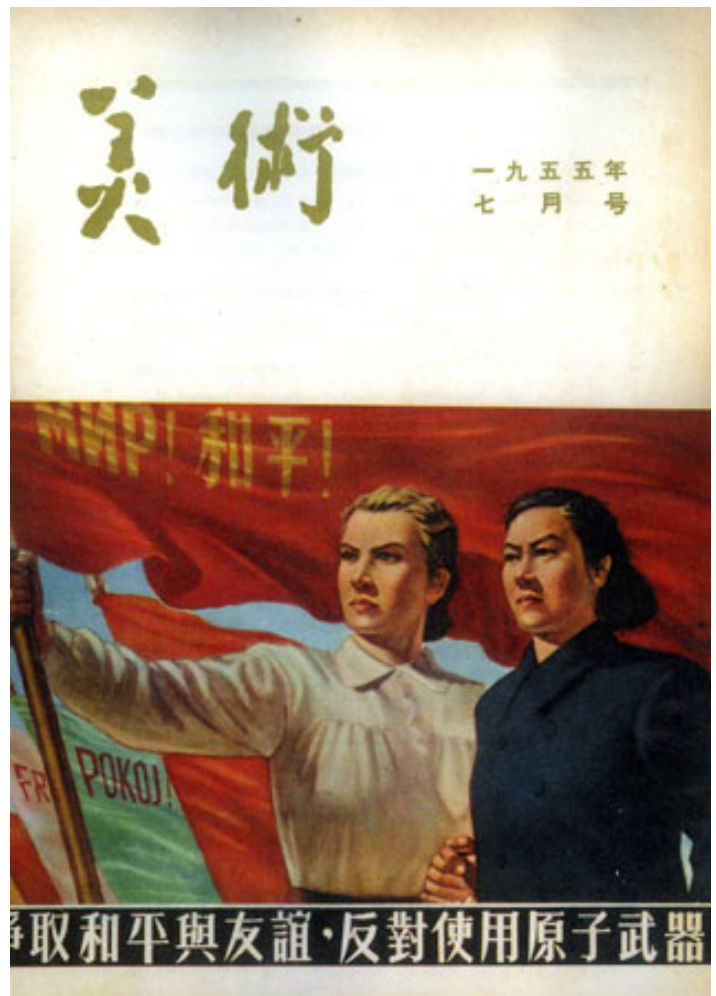


Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu

From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part II

Continued "From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part I"

In the 1940s, as Socialist Realism took form and began to emerge following the establishment of the Communist Party's leading position in China, its language drew from the realism that had spread throughout the Chinese mainland in the 1920s and '30s. After 1949, Mao started to develop a cultural policy and released several statements on the matter; realism gradually transformed into revolutionary realism. Its incorporation into the revolutionary romanticism of the time meant that it ceased to be a realism that was naturalist in tendency. Rather, it gained spiritual connotations, and provided a blueprint for the political vision of socialism.



Cover of the periodical *Meishu*, 1955.

In this school of realism, artists sought methods of placing compelling, realistic details at the service of great political lies. The resources and dissemination mechanisms of art production were strictly controlled at one single source, rendering the creative motivations, education, and desires of the individual incomparably insignificant. The devastation

wrought on intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution was further recorded in “scar art” and “scar literature.”¹ During this period, hundreds of new magazines emerged, as well as thousands of translated texts and periodicals, while some selected foreign films and television programs were screened.

The second emergence of realism in China took place after the Cultural Revolution. This time, realism emerged as a resistant stance – or perhaps it would be more accurately described as emerging in the form of dissatisfaction with the increasingly empty realism that had taken shape since the founding of the nation and the Cultural Revolution. This realism depicted a realer reality, reality as it was witnessed, not the idealized reality portrayed and promised in Communist propaganda discourse, which tended to magnify certain details in the Communist Party’s favor.

For instance, in Luo Zhongli’s 1980 painting *Father*, the face of an aged farmer was painted in a size nearly as large as the portrait of Chairman Mao that adorns Tiananmen Gate, its details painstakingly depicted. On the surface, this artwork appears to be staunchly resistant to the regime, since prior to the Cultural Revolution, only portraits of leaders were allowed to appear

in such a large size. When we look closer, we notice that a pen is sticking out from behind the farmer’s ear. Luo Zhongli had wished to express the subject matter purely and naturalistically. But after keenly grasping information about how the government wished to convey the message of a new, educated generation of Chinese citizens, the artist decided to add the pen behind the farmer’s ear, successfully depicting the type of worker, peasant, and soldier that the government of this new era hoped to mold. This addition thus allowed the work, despite its unconventional size, to conform to the government’s new campaign, and allowed the artist to escape blame or suspicion. The pen focused attention on the portrayal of the laborer as – in the language of the Cultural Revolution – “red, bright, and luminescent,” rather than on the bold breakthrough that the painting’s size represented. *Father* thus gained an easy entry into that year’s National Fine Arts Exhibition, winning the grand prize and becoming possibly the most recognizable image of modern Chinese art history.

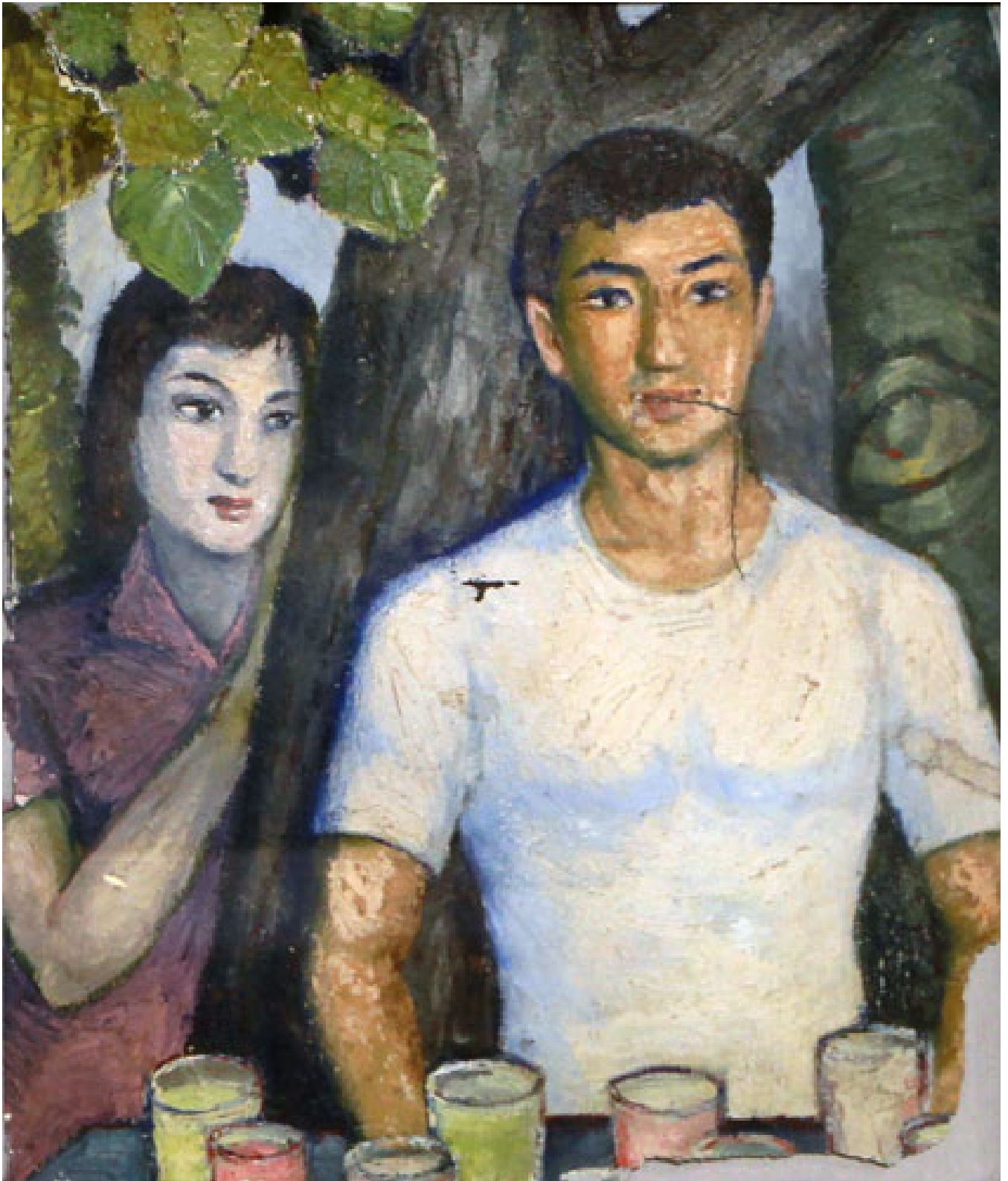
Stars Art Group

In 1986, Gao Minglu summed up the artistic trends he had observed as the “85 Art

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Luo Zhongli, *Father*, 1980. Oil on canvas.



Zhou Maiyou, *Water Seller*, 1970. Oil painting, 61 x 62 cm.



Zhu Jinshi, *Gulou Self-Portrait*, 1978. Oil painting, 56.5 x 43.5 cm.

Movement.” He wrote an essay on the matter, which he presented at the 1986 National Oil Painting Exhibition. He stated,

In rational painting,² the figures are very mechanical. You cannot determine who they are. It is almost as if they have no relationship with reality. There was an appeal for “modernization” at the time, the pursuit of a sense of transcendence, a desire for entry into international modernization. This desire led to an affirmation of [the painters’] own cultural identity, an affirmation that was, to a certain extent, abstract rather than concrete. At the time, whether in oil paintings, ink paintings, or sculptures, there was always an emphasis on this internationality and modernity, and on one’s own cultural identity. This was their basic affirmation of identity, and it made it so that the painter had to engage in surrealist methods of expression. There are so many art forms in the West. Why did these artists choose rational painting? They emerged from the old realist education, but this expressive form was more connected to the artists’ pursuits, particularly to the cultural appeals of the cultural ferment of the 1980s and a new generation of cultured people.³

This appeal for artistic and cultural modernization has been the embodiment of Chinese intellectuals’ sense of duty to nation and society since the early twentieth century. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the state loosened ideological control, and interaction with international society on all levels was reactivated.

The Stars Art Group of 1979–80 emerged in a period of relative transparency and openness in the Chinese government following the end of the Cultural Revolution. Most participants in these events

had similar family backgrounds, being either the children of high-ranking cadres (as they say in Beijing, “children of the big courtyard”) or hailing from intellectual families. Though many of their families were impacted by the Cultural Revolution, from a certain perspective, they can be said to have enjoyed certain “privileges” as a class, one such privilege being that, when compared to average people, they could more easily gain knowledge from their families, and often enjoyed advanced access to various publications and news outlets that were new or perhaps tightly

controlled or even “banned.”⁴

On September 27, 1979, while the thirtieth anniversary of the People’s Republic National Fine Arts Exhibition was being held at the National Art Museum of China, the Stars took over a fence along a small garden on the museum’s east side, “Covering it in hangings of over 150 artworks by their twenty-three members, including oil paintings, ink paintings, pencil drawings, woodcuts, and woodcarvings.”⁵

According to Wang Keping’s account in *The Story of the Stars*, some large woodcarvings were placed on the ground, and some paintings were hung on trees. The poets of the literary magazine *Today* also wrote short poems, which were attached to the paintings. On the third day of the “Stars Art Exhibition,” some thirty police officers cordoned off the east wing of the museum, where their artworks were being kept, and replaced the artworks on the fence with an announcement that was jointly signed by the Dongcheng District police precinct and the Urban Management Bureau. They confiscated the artworks and forbid the Stars from continuing their exhibition.

The artists held a meeting in the museum with Liu Xun, the chairman of the Artists Association, who was appointed to represent the Beijing government. The artists requested the return of their artworks and a public apology from the government. The artists marched on October 1, and later descriptions tend to cast the Stars exhibition as a political incident. But in fact, during the discussion and planning of the protest, most of the members of the Stars group chose to back out, and artist Huang Rui, one of the core members, was very hesitant about protesting, saying that “artists should succeed through art.” Among the original twenty-three Stars, only eight participated in the protest. Huang Rui recalls:

You could call it a peaceful protest, because we followed the police’s directions. We only walked along Chang’an Boulevard for three hundred meters and then moved to the street behind Chang’an, walking past the three front gates – Hepingmen, Qianmen, and Chongwenmen. At Chongwenmen we turned the corner and arrived at the City Council building. We delivered our petition and dispersed ... We never imagined we would achieve our goal. Not only were our paintings returned, we were allowed to continue the exhibition in Beihai Park. With the help of the protest, the first Stars exhibition was restored.⁶

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Zhang Wei, *The Forbidden City*, 1975. Oil painting, 19 x 26 cm.

The Aftermath of the Stars Art Group

This event is often viewed as the origin of contemporary art in China, and because of the exhibition's closing and the artists' subsequent resistance, it has often been considered an act of resistance against the government and its authority, an act full of political awareness. This "resistance" that is projected onto the event misconceives of resistance as reflection, which is problematic in the widespread discourse about contemporary art practice in China. Simple gestures of defiance have been frequently taken as a critical reflection, whereas individual gestures are more commonly linked to emotional release and intuitiveness and are regarded as lacking a rational understanding of the structural political problems of the time. However, this understanding of the event is flawed: the artists of the Stars Art Group did not consciously take to the streets due to opposing political views. The incident arose out of their hope to present their creations, and the fact that they encountered an obstacle.

The ruling party has always been able to grasp the standards of what kind of art is possible and allowed. The first Stars exhibition is such an example. Afterward, the artists were able to negotiate with the Artists Association for a second exhibition, and were officially registered with the Artists Association in the summer of 1980. The Second Stars Art Exhibition was held on August 20 of that year, causing a sensation. Roughly five thousand viewers attended every day, and the group's influence spread across the country. The next year, the Stars, with the help of Artists Association chairman Jiang Feng, held an exhibition in the National Art Museum of China. Originally slated to run for three weeks, the exhibition was extended for an extra two weeks. "Visitors totaled 160,000, with seven to eight thousand attending each day."⁷

Poet and critic Zhu Zhu writes,

It is very meaningful that the rebellious stance of the Stars was not "anti-centrist" but actually oriented towards the center. Though the Stars encompassed an independent spirit and a will to self-expression, in terms of rhetoric they were still linked to ideology, forming – as the group's name implies – a kind of "response to the sun" hierarchal relationship. The group's determination to penetrate the walls around the National Art Museum shows their psychological or subconscious reverence and infatuation with the patriarchy. In any case, entry implied recognition by the system or by authority, the realization of their self-value. For them,

the National Art Museum was a Bastille waiting to be destroyed, as well as a shrine of their dreams.⁸

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the state was willing to relax controls on art and culture, and this lessening of pressure on art breathed new life into all manner of cultural activities. Meanwhile, the traditional concept of "officialdom as the natural outlet for scholars" continued to influence rulers and intellectuals. Intellectuals used criticism and newly opened channels for art and literature to appeal to the government to further engage in modernizing reforms similar to those they had carried out in the economic realm, in hopes that on this foundation could be formed a system that they could approve of and serve. On the other hand, the central party leadership, with Deng Xiaoping at its core, while promoting the opening of horizons and the development of the economy, had no choice but to confront the explosion of individual desire that followed the opening of the economy.

To control the pace of reform, radical and conservative factions rose and fell within the reform movement. Under these circumstances,

central authorities carried out a series of activities: between 1979 and 1980, moving against Beijing's "Democracy Wall" and the calls in Shanghai periodicals promoting the use of true democracy to carry out reform of the system; from 1980 to 1981, moving against bourgeois liberalist tendencies in the literature and art worlds; from 1983 to 1984, moving against "spiritual pollution"; from 1985 to 1986, moving against "unhealthy tendencies," etc. In all of these interventions and policy fluctuations between tolerance and suppression, Deng Xiaoping occasionally recognized the conservatives' worries about ideas and social instability, and occasionally affirmed the reformers' view that self-expression was indispensable to reform.⁹

Hans van Dijk, an artist who came to Nanjing to study Chinese in the 1980s, provided unique insight into the shift in Chinese cultural policies after the end of the Cultural Revolution. In his essay "Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates," he wrote,

Deng Xiaoping's reform efforts brought society into a period of relative freedom. At first, his cultural policies appeared to be a major transition for the world of literature and art. After over 30 years of dogmatism

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Lin Zhaohua, *Absolute Signal*, 1982. Documentation from the play of the same name.

and cultural isolation, the Chinese literary and art scene was about to be released from the Socialist dogma that art should serve politics.

He continued:

This essay proposes, however, that in reality, Deng Xiaoping intended for art to continue its traditional role of legitimizing the nation-state, and to continue defining China's "state identity," though by means that differed from the Mao era.¹⁰

Van Dijk believed that Deng differed from Mao in that the national heritage that had been deemed "feudalist" and "elitist" under Mao had, under Deng, been revived and put to new use as a pillar for creating and supporting a new sense of national self-confidence. In the 1980s, as modern Western art and philosophical ideas were introduced into China, young artists began to avoid artistic experiments that had been banned by the government, forming an artistic movement with independent ideas. The conflicts that arose with the government's will highlighted the political tasks and roles that Deng wished to assign to art.

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Wang Hui once wrote that the liberalizing policies of the 1980s served to liberate China from the constraints of the past and the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, but also revealed the bias of the worldview created by state ideology:

For the generation that grew up after the Cultural Revolution, their guiding knowledge was knowledge about the West, particularly America (and as before, it was knowledge with another kind of bias). Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Southern Europe – these once-familiar societies and cultures – were virtually outside of the popular range of knowledge. In reflections and writings on the Vietnam War in the 1980s, the dominant position was not thinking about war and new international relations, but rethinking of the Cultural Revolution, to the point that vilifying the Cultural Revolution became the crux of this reflective morality.¹¹

Descriptions from these two perspectives came to form the backdrop and conceptual foundation of Chinese contemporary art's emergence in China. Chinese contemporary art practitioners benefited from the state's initial atmosphere of



Ma Kelu, *Zhongshan Park*, 1975. Oil painting, 26 x 19.6 cm.

openness, while being constrained by the state's wavering stance on the matter. But the two maintained a certain level of unity regarding expectations and goals. The state's openness was not unidirectional, and its suppression was not continuous.

Contemporary Art in China

Most Chinese contemporary art specialists believe that

beginning in 1979, the art world spontaneously split into two camps – official and non-official art. The former continued with traditional Chinese painting, woodcutting, and oil painting rooted in Russian Socialist Realism. But in the non-official art circle, experiments in all manner of artistic forms became central. These experiments were all, to varying degrees, influenced by Western modern art.¹²

But we have discovered that in the early days after the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was no clear divide between official and non-official art. There was active reflection within official art on the great pressure placed on artistic creation by the politics and ideology of the Cultural Revolution, and attempts were made in various directions to restore freedom in artistic creation and thinking.

For example, Gao Xingjian's 1982 play *Absolute Signal* originally contained a description of the troubles of an unemployed youth, but in order to pass the censors, the play was changed to be about saving an unemployed youth. The subject matter of unemployment was considered negative and was unwelcome by the government and by the Ministry of Culture and its municipal governing bodies, which still monitor theater, films, publishing, and museum programs today. Such subject matter put its author at risk of being suspended, fined, and even deprived of future rights for expression. The play was eventually shown, and made groundbreaking experiments in language, acting, set design, lighting, and directing, gaining liberation in form. Likewise, some of the members of the No Name Group and the Stars Art Group chose to paint landscapes, still lifes, and abstract paintings in order to gain more room for artistic practice. But long-term constraints left these formal experiments and breakthroughs without fundamental conceptual momentum, so that in the end, they became empty or impossible to carry further.

The book *Research on the Beijing School of Painting in the 20th Century* explains that after the end of the Cultural Revolution, artists went

into a creative frenzy and collective awareness was heightened, but organizational aspects did not keep pace with these changes. At the time, the Art Bureau of the Ministry of Culture was already established, and the Beijing Municipal Fine Art Photography Exhibition office was still working to organize exhibitions. But these organizations were limited in scope, and coupled with a lack of cohesive official character and reliable administrative measures, they were unable to adapt to the rapid changes in the objective situation. These various groups were just beginning to prepare for restoration and reconstruction, and in this situation, there emerged the phenomenon of artists spontaneously organizing their own art groups in order to satisfy their desire to hold exhibitions and exchanges.

The emergence of artist groups in this period can be traced back to the *New Spring Painting Exhibition* held at Beijing's Zhongshan Park in January 1979. This exhibition was arranged by Yan Zhenduo, Li Yuchang, and other young oil painters, and featured the Beijing oil painters Liu Haisu, Wu Zuoren, Liu Xun, Wu Guanzhong, Jin Shangyi, Yuan Yinsheng, and Liu Bingjiang, as well as some amateur oil painting enthusiasts who still held other jobs, such as Zhong Ming and Wang Leifu. The exhibition showed works by a total of thirty-six artists. The artists chose their own work, there was no censorship, and they set up the exhibition together, rotating work shifts and not arranging the exhibition according to rank. The atmosphere was relaxed and harmonious.

Jiang Feng, who had just been rehabilitated, wrote the foreword to the catalogue for this exhibition, in which he raised several issues: there should be "no censorship system for exhibitions"; artists should be able to "freely form artist groups"; they should "promote diversity of style, medium, and subject matter among artworks"; artworks "can be marked for sale"; and exhibitions should be "self-funded, with no need for government sponsorship."¹³ The questions he raised in this text represented sentiments shared among artists of the time, and some of the suggestions eventually became reality. In particular, his statement about "freely forming artist groups" was received with an immediate, enthusiastic response among young painters. The painters who took part in this exhibition began by establishing the Beijing Oil Painting Research Group. Many artist groups and research groups soon followed in Beijing. Some thirty such groups have been documented, with membership approaching one thousand people. Twenty-five of these groups were in frequent contact with the Beijing branch of the Artists Association.



Song Yonghong, *Night Flag*, 1997. Oil painting, 150 x 110 cm.

A group of realist paintings that emerged in 1989 can be seen as a third wave of realism that differed from both Socialist Realism and the post-Cultural Revolution realism that engaged it in dialogue. The realism that emerged at this time did not magnify reality in life, but instead directly depicted reality in life. Yet it also expressed the negative, disoriented sentiments of life. The rock music, literature, and artistic creations that emerged after 1989 directly extracted fragments of reality from “homes,” “the streets,” “parks,” “buses,” and “corners,” recreating the most common, public level of reality using the most direct, naked, and unadorned language. It was as if all of our lives could enter the painting, the song, the story. Song Yonghong and Liu Xiaodong were among the artists who engaged in a direct depiction of life on the streets, portraying the most mundane and uneventful scenes of family life, friends, and passersby. Song Yonghong once described the original intent behind his 1990s series that “openly” depicted “sex” in this way:

Whether in life or in art, reality only leaves us with random fragments. No social event or artistic form, or the values they represent, can produce a profound and

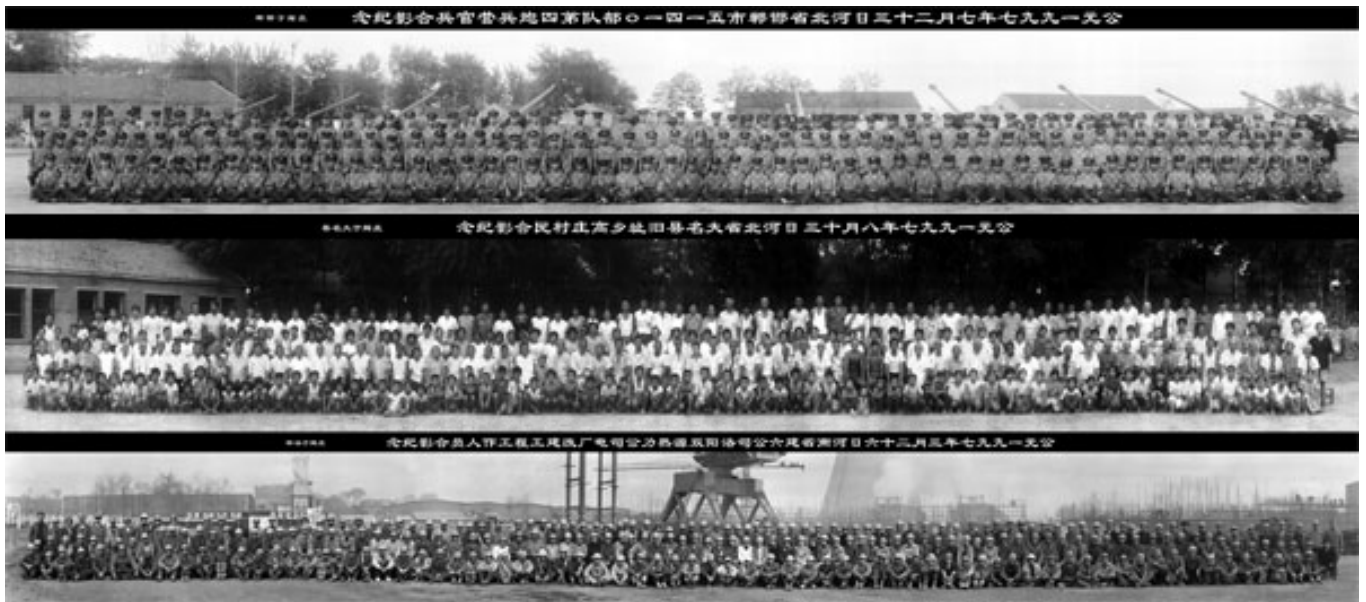
lasting effect on our minds. Thus, boredom becomes the truest perception of our current state of existence. So in my works, there often appears a cold, mocking, voyeuristic attitude of the onlooker, uncovering those countless boring, nauseating, yet inauthentic amusing scenes within common social settings, revealing the trivial, despicable, and ridiculous behavior in everyday life.¹⁴

What we are trying to understand is that what we view as “dissent” and what we see as unconnected to us or the object of our opposition, and this “other thread” that we do not care about, might actually come from the same source as the trajectory we are currently on.

What we are reflecting on is the lack of a diversity of narrative perspectives in the field of Chinese contemporary art, a situation that mirrors the lack of diverse perspectives in the research on China’s history. The one-sidedness of the picture of the world and of this country drawn by state ideology is embodied in the magazine *Meishu* (Fine Arts), which was published between 1954 and 1966. In its first issue, the magazine, run by China’s Artists



Song Yonghong, *Riverside Landscape*, 1998. Oil painting, 150 x 110 cm.



Above: Zhuang Hui, Hebei Handan 51410 Army Fourth Artillery Troop on July 23, 1997, 1997. 101×614 cm; Middle: Zhuang Hui, Hebei Daming County Relic Site Xianggao Villagers on August 13, 1997, 1997. 101×579 cm; Below: Zhuang Hui, Henan Sixth Contruction Co. Luoyang Dual-Source Thermal Power Co. Ltd Alteration Project Crew, March 26, 1997, 1997. 101×735 cm

Association (itself founded in 1949), published an essay on the “new Chinese painting movement.” In its early days, while Socialist Realism was further crafted into ideology, *Meishu* promoted various forms of mass art, such as New Year’s prints, panel comics, and propaganda posters, playing a major role in establishing the forms of art in the new China. Before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, each issue contained discussions on Socialist Realism, selective introductions to Asian countries with similar ideologies and viewpoints, in-depth essays on art forms found in the Soviet states, and sustained attacks on the capitalist tendencies of European art. To this day, our understanding of artistic and cultural trends in the world, including in Asia, remains very one sided, even deficient.

Criticizing the Cultural Revolution has become the primary criterion for the legitimacy of art criticism in China, but this vilification has remained on the level of emotional release. It lacks rational, critical, and spiritual resources for analyzing and discussing the profound and lingering effects of the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution is often described as a break; it is rarely analyzed as an expressive form and organizational component of China’s

modernization process. Likewise, our tendency is generally to treat artistic creation from the founding of the party to the Cultural Revolution and the creation of the Artists Association in 1949 as the entirety of the art produced in this long period. Because of this art’s emphasis on politics, this subject has for a long time been isolated due to certain abstract moral viewpoints. We have actively chosen to avoid it. It has gotten to the point that we are unable to fully penetrate the trajectory of art’s modernization in China.

Aside from attributing the process of modernization in China to our learning from the West, we have continuously failed to discover the internal logic and basis for such a development within our own history and traditions. We have thus failed to establish ourselves as a subject that was responsible internally and independently for what happened. We often describe ourselves and our transformation as entirely subject to external influences from the West. Through the repeated emphasis on the advanced status of the West and our own backwardness, we are unable to squarely face a modernization process that strays from a linear developmental model, and unable to confront the fact that the isolation, failure, and regression



Cover of the periodical *Meishu*, 1957.

of the Cultural Revolution was actually a part of this modernization process. We have grown dependent on an allegorical view and experience of history that is a stair-step progression of movement. However, China was in fact projected along a track of its own modernity during the few decades before and after the Cultural Revolution. This perspective allows us to view China in a way that transcends the framework of a strictly national modernization, reactivating our subjectivity in the perception and understanding of the national history of art within an international, global scope, even though this subject is full of contradictions and shortcomings. In practice, we have never been able to admit the fact that we have our own subjectivity

Globalization and the Rethinking of Socialist Realism

Since 1989, in the field of art, Europe has never stopped thinking about the phenomena, challenges, and possibilities brought by globalization. Globalization is not something that is about to take place, nor is it an external phenomena. It is an accepted reality that has already become a part of people's work and life. This acceptance, however, is not passive. It is something that is constantly rethought, discussed, and criticized. Thinking about globalization has become a dominant line of thought in discussions of artistic creation and art theory.

However, the East-West dichotomy model of thought from the Cold War continues to persist today:

We believe that these people have turned the goal of enlightenment into a substantive process, and so the concept of globalization they describe has become somewhat misleading. They all view globalization from a teleological viewpoint on modernity, viewing this globalization as the endpoint and goal of history, using existing historical models to shape our own history. But they have not realized that whether or not we are willing, we are already situated within the historical relationships of globalization.¹⁵

The summary negation of the past has formed into an overly absolutist expression of history. It obstructs the possibility of viewing ourselves today through the lens of our own past and that of others.

The rethinking of Chinese socialism that took place in the 1980s unfolded along a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, and its criticism of socialism's problems could not be

extended to a rethinking of the reform process and the model it found in Western modernity. On the contrary, criticism of socialism became a means of self-affirmation in the post-Cold War era. China's socialist movement was a resistance movement as well as a modernization movement. It was carried out through the effort to build the nation and the process of industrialization. Its historical experiences and lessons are inextricably linked to the process of modernization itself. We propose to treat Socialist Realism as a dominant thread in our examination of modernity in China. Socialist Realism has always been intertwined with the appeal for modernization in China's evolution. Not only was the question of modernization in China raised by Marxism, but Marxism itself is an ideology of modernization. Not only was modernization a fundamental goal of the Chinese socialist movement, it is itself the main trait of Chinese modernity.



Zhou Maiyou, *Wang Fu Jing Fruit Store*, 1970. Oil painting, 19.5 x 13.5 cm.

The concept of modernization in the Chinese context differs from the theoretical concept of modernization, particularly because the Chinese concept of modernization encompasses values that are oriented around socialist ideology. Mao Zedong's socialism is, on the one hand, an ideology of modernization, and on the other, a criticism of European and American capitalist modernization. It is clear that the politics of names is the politics of memory. Our Socialist Realist conceptual tradition took shape within a named reality, and it is within that named reality that it stretches into the present day. By bringing it into the light for examination, we hope that this is only the beginning of discussions and efforts to reconstruct the situation and in doing so, restore its complexity.

The Revival of Realism

In recent years, the revival of realism has begun to emerge not in painting but within the art world, in the calls, actions, creations, and appeals for art to intervene in society. Some artists have fiercely criticized the intellectual orientation of art. When confronting the harsh political reality and the worsening contradictions in society, some artists feel that art should engage more directly in social movements. Some artists reenact social reality in their works – particularly the reality of society's lower rungs – in the belief that through this reenactment, modeling, and recreation, the absurd yet real, harsh, and unforgiving social organizational methods and the aesthetics of the bottom of society and rural life can propose critical suggestions and solutions, and that in doing so, the artists themselves occupy the moral high ground. These acts and artistic standpoints often reject the intellectual side of artistic practice, and thus are unable to achieve substantive participation and intervention.

They also crudely exclude other forms of creation, forming yet another narrow definition of art. Through many years of political movements, including the Cultural Revolution, artists have been asked to equate themselves with workers, peasants, and soldiers in terms of their class affiliation, behavior models, and values. They have been told that their views and sympathies should lie with the people. The social intervention actions that have suddenly burst forth in the art world in the past few years – and artists have quickly described this practice as a form of creation in their artist statements and through collaboration with critics – reveal a certain hero complex in the minds of these artists, a certain desire to play the role of savior, an appeal to attract attention and a sense of being at the center through these actions.

To a great extent, artists today experience a powerful feeling of loss of position. Though they are all deeply involved in a particular project or creative process, there is always this feeling of being left undescribed, of being absent from the dynamic and guiding artistic discourse, a sense of dissatisfaction due to unknown origins. In fact, there may not exist an absolutely dominant artistic discourse. Looking at the current situation in China, there is a sense of acute presence and vividness in the various regions, artistic communities, and levels of artistic practice. This can be seen in various blog posts and reports on art websites.

Within a short period of time, a younger generation of creators enters into a honeymoon period of scrutiny, support, consumption, discussion, and description thanks to the novelty-seeking nature of the art system.

Meanwhile, many artists who have been working since the 1970s, though they were once granted a certain amount of recognition from the art system – including being described as participants in one art movement or another, held up as the representatives or leading figures of their generations, included in international exhibitions on Chinese art, and lauded by collectors and the market – still face the threat of no longer being described.

Artists born in the 1950s and early 1960s generally face long-term anxiety about whether they will be able to appear on the covers of art history texts and in the lists of auction records. The attention fixed on them has not shifted to their works, despite the passage of time. Descriptions of these artists remain focused on the prices fetched by their work in the art market. There is little discussion and understanding that transcends this level. A considerable number of Chinese artists that reached the height of their artistic careers in the mid-1990s, such as Fang Lijun, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Xiaogang, and Yue Minjun, are today icons of success based on extreme wealth and record-setting auction prices. But few have received a proper scholarly survey of their artistic career. Suffering from a lack of academic interest, in the past decade Fang Lijun has tried to organize touring exhibitions about his career in order to highlight his own position in art history and generate new waves of critical discussion about his works. These attempts, however, have only served to elevate the price of his works further. We could say that in the past three decades of Chinese contemporary art, there are so many works and ideas that have not been recognized.

For most artists who grew up in the 1970s and '80s and reached maturity in the '90s, the critical world's silence has left them lost, perplexed, and conflicted. They accumulated considerable capital between the early '90s and the 2008 financial crisis, and have made it safely into the new wealthy elite in a supposedly classless contemporary China. Interestingly, they operate within this class, using auction donations and other mechanisms to shape themselves into public figures of a sort. At the same time, they cannot escape the sense of loss that comes from being unable to gain the attention of curators and critics. Here, the development of art has lost continuity. One often sees artists such as Zhang Enli, Liu Xiaodong, and Zeng Fanzhi – all of whom work with international galleries and have exceptional market performance – circulate more among collectors, dealers, and the new rich than among the intellectual spheres of the art world.

As the art market began to flourish after 2000, contemporary art's self-consumption

became a possibility, unlike in the '90s. Most artists and galleries who unconsciously followed supply and demand in their work were able to grasp within a short period of time the right to choose creations, present creations, collect creations, and even set the standards of creation, thanks to the economic order. To date, economic forces continue to be the strongest ruling power in the field of art.

Certain artists who once gained attention and were placed at the center of the artistic landscape in the '90s gradually lost this sense of centrality after 2008. Some of these artists have backpacked, setting out for distant places to take photographs and collect material. Zhuang Hui and Li Yongbin, for instance, have in the past several years spent a considerable amount of time travelling by public transportation or motorbike through places such as western China, known for its extreme conditions. This attitude invokes the "hard labor" of Mao's era, when intellectuals were called to go into rural or mountainous areas and learn from the working class. Li Yongbin even moved to a village outside of Beijing, seeking a kind of solitary state of being. There are also artists who have returned to the reality depicted in traditional Chinese landscape painting, travelling to the locations themselves in hopes of understanding the work of past artists and gaining new creative vision. Yin Zhaoyang, for instance, who became celebrated in the '90s for his paintings of youth cruelty, has shifted the focus of his painting to recreating compositions and aesthetics seen in traditional Chinese landscape paintings. Compared to the romantic view of art, the working methods of artists today and the ways they choose to participate in the art system are heavily realist in tone. The socialist significance of their arts stems mainly from the hopes that people place in art for progress and development.

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e-flux journal #56 — June 2014 Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu
From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part II

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*.

Carol Yinghua Lu lives and works in Beijing. She is the contributing editor for *Frieze* and is on the advisory board for the *Exhibitionist*. Lu was on the jury for the Golden Lion Award in 2011 Venice Biennale and the co-artistic director of 2012 Gwangju Biennale and co-curator of the 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale in 2012. Since 2012, she is the artistic director and chief curator of OCAT Shenzhen. Lu was the first visiting fellow of Asia-Pacific at Tate Research Centre in 2013.

1
A form of realism, “scar art” as a movement attempted to draw closer to reality than the Socialist Realism of the time.

2
In 1986, Gao Minglu published an essay called “On Rational Painting” in the magazine *Meishu* (Fine Arts), in which he categorized some of the paintings that emerged in the first half of the 1980s as “rational painting,” referring mainly to the analytical and critical tendency of those paintings, as opposed to intuitive and emotional expressions. Gao stated that realist painting was one kind of rational painting that involved both faithful depictions of reality and a humanistic spirit, as well as an aspiration for a “real” realism, a realism of critical reflection instead of a romanticized one.

3
Liu Libin, “Nan yi Wangque de ‘85 Yundong’: Duihua Gao Minglu” [The unforgettable “85 Movement”: A dialogue with Gao Minglu], *Art World Magazine*, 2005.

4
Zhu Zhu, *Yuandian: “Xingxing Hua Hui”* [Point of origin: The “Stars Art Group”] (Nanjing: Vision Art Publisher, 2007), 22.

5
Ibid.

6
Zhu Zhu, “Huang Rui Fangtan” [Interview with Huang Rui], in *Yuandian*.

7
Zhu Zhu, *Yuandian*.

8
Ibid.

9
Fairbank.

10
Hans van Dijk, “Painting in China After the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates (Part I: 1979–1985),” *China Information* 5.3 (Winter 1991–92): 1–21.

11
Wang Hui, *Zhongguo “Xin Ziyou Zhuyi” de Lishi Genyuan* [The Historical Roots of “Neoliberalism” in China] (Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 2008), 123.

12
Hans van Dijk, “Painting in China After the Cultural Revolution.”

13
Jiang Feng, “Beijing Paintings At the Beginning of the Reform and Open Door Policy,” in *A History of Beijing Paintings in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Shao Dazhong and Li Song (Beijing: Beijing Fine Art Academy, 2007). Text taken from the website.

14

Song Yonghong, Artist’s Statement as part of a text by Lv Peng, “The Spiritual Comfort of Objective Expression: On Song Yonghong’s Art,” in *Song Yonghong* (Beijing: Beijing Art Now Gallery, 2006). 40.

15
Wang Hui, “Appendix 1: Answering Questions on Modernity,” in *Zhongguo “Xin Ziyou Zhuyi” de Lishi Genyuan* [The Historical Roots of “Neoliberalism” in China], 482–511.

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