

WHY CHINA, WHY NOW?



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Shao Yinong and Mu Chen, *Childhood Memory Monument to the People's Heroes*, 2001. Altered photograph

The Shock of 艺术

When the landmark exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* appeared in the United States in 1998, many viewers—even those with considerable international art-world experience—found themselves suddenly confounded. The show, organized by Gao Minglu, then a doctoral candidate at Harvard University, presented not modern variations on traditional Chinese ink painting and ceramics, or Socialist Realist images of the sort prescribed in China since midcentury under Mao Zedong, but startlingly up-to-date works from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan by some seventy-two contemporary artists and groups versed in every current Western art form: oil painting, sculpture, installation, photography, performance, video, and new media. Styles and themes varied widely, from Zhang Peili's analytical painting of gloves to Gu Wenda's screens of human hair, from Hong Hao's altered maps to several Zhang Huan nude-performance photographs (page 84). References to Western art were numerous (seeming take-offs on Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, installation art, and so on), but certain elements, such as the deadpan stare of Zhang Xiaogang's flat, big-headed family portraits (page 28), remained deeply puzzling to non-Chinese viewers.

The following year at the Venice Biennale, artistic director Harald Szeemann, a longtime curatorial maverick, surprised many by including works by a large contingent of Chinese artists, notably major installations by exiles Chen Zhen and Cai Guo-Qiang on view at the Arsenale, while Huang Yong Ping served as national representative of his adopted France. Again, this time on an international scale, the public reaction was one of embarrassed amazement. Edgy, formally diverse new art was being produced, in abundance and with great imaginative verve, by Chinese artists both in the People's Republic of China and across the globe. Why was the Western art public so unaware of this well-developed phenomenon? And given what we recalled of postwar events in the PRC—the decades of Maoist regimentation, the ideological hysteria of the Cultural Revolution, the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown—how could it have happened? What had we missed, and what other marvels would the New China yield?

In large part, such wonder was due to our own myopia. Since the early 1980s, a number of Chinese artists had managed to study or exhibit abroad, and from time to time international shows, especially in Europe, presented post-Mao work that suggested the rise of an avant-garde in the People's Republic. Most

notably, in 1993 Arndreas Schmid and Hans van Dijk (a Belgian, soon to become a pioneering organizer and archivist within China) curated *China Avant-garde: Counter-currents in Art and Culture*, a sixty-artist survey at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Nearly a score of mainland Chinese painters appeared in a group show at the 1993 Venice Biennale, and a few others turned up in subsequent installments. The seminal 1993 exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*, organized by scholar-dealer Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson Chang) with critic Li Xianting, was documented by an English-language book that reached far beyond the show's original Hong Kong venues. And in 1997, shortly after the first progressive galleries opened on the mainland, Texas expatriate Robert Berrnell began to offer hundreds of English-language articles and books on new Chinese art through his Beijing and Hong Kong-based website, bookstore, and publishing company, today called Timezone 8.

However, during the 1980s, Western critical and commercial attention was focused on German and Italian Neo-Expressionism and the emergence, particularly in the United States, of a new art-star system, a branch of the ever-expanding celebrity culture. In the 1990s, as the art market struggled to recover from the recession that took hold in the late 1980s, attention remained focused locally: on the culture wars in the U.S., on the sensation of the Young British Artists. Only at the turn of the twenty-first century did China suddenly seem rich enough—economically, socially, and artistically—to seize widespread art world attention.

Since then, the cognitive jolt of *Inside Out* has been repeated many times. Curators have responded with myriad new shows, and dealers are increasingly eager to proffer Chinese work to a mounting number of collectors whose desire—reflected in travel plans and soaring prices—has reached a near frenzy. By now, most Western viewers have encountered recent Chinese work or at least have come across reproductions of it in magazines or books. What they have encountered is partly familiar and partly alien, as if one were reading an English sentence and suddenly came upon 艺术, the Chinese term for "art." Ideally, the response would be combined pleasure and discomfort, coalescing into a wish to understand.

Among Westerners, perhaps only sinologists fully conversant in the history, culture, and language of China may claim to apprehend contemporary Chinese art as it is seen and felt within the PRC itself. Yet other alert Western viewers need not lose heart, for seeing through Chinese eyes may yield only part of the rewards offered by this work—and arguably only a secondary part at that. Since its inception, China's experimental art has responded avidly to influences from abroad, and has aimed, in large part, to gain critical and commercial acceptance in the global milieu.

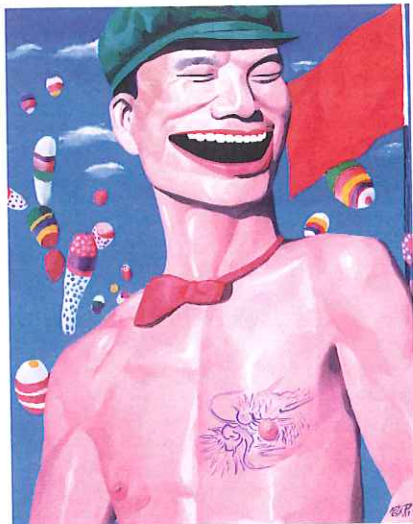
For better or for worse, the Chinese avant-garde has merged into the international monoculture—a realm where artists from Prague to Mumbai, from Sydney to Reykjavik absorb a ubiquitous popular culture, address similar critical issues, use a common visual language (subject to minor regional inflections), and seek validation by the same museums, critical publications, universities, galleries, and auction houses. Any viewer familiar with today's visual lingua franca, derived primarily from Western avant-gardism of the turn of the last century, will find contemporary Chinese art accessible. Even its strains of inherent Chineseness are reasonably interpretable when one takes into account certain key effects of history and sensibility. We begin, then, with the most basic question: what are the chief factors that determine how art is made and received in the People's Republic today?

Size Matters

Geographically, China is the third largest country on earth (slightly larger, if all its territorial claims are accepted, than the United States)—stretching roughly 3,200 miles from north to south and east to west. Ordinarily, a land this size would be divided into five time zones; but, as a sign of national unity and central authority, the clocks in all 22 provinces, five nominally "autonomous" regions, four provincial-level municipalities (Beijing, Chongqing, Shanghai, Tianjin), and two special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau) are set to concur with those of the capital. China's populace comprises some fifty-six ethnic groups (although the Han make up a 92 percent majority), speaking several distinct languages and six major Chinese dialects in addition to the official



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Illusion II: Explosion Project*, 2006. Realized at Mückernstrasse/Stresemannstrasse, Berlin, July 11, 2006, 9:30 p.m., 18 minutes. 2,000 assorted fireworks shells, plaster, wood, and cardboard. Commissioned by Deutsche Guggenheim.



Mandarin. The population now numbers 1.3 billion, nearly twice that of Europe and more than four times the United States total. Indeed, China holds one of every five persons alive today.

This giant, nominally Communist, but, in practice, capitalist dynamo, boasts industries (70 percent of them now in the private sector) generating a GDP of some \$2.7 trillion. China has the world's fourth-largest economy, with a growth rate of nearly 10 percent per year for the last quarter century. While the country's burgeoning wealth creates rising expectations, an immense consumer market that foreign firms are racing to service, and a construction boom of gargantuan proportions, it also reveals some tremendous prosperity gaps—especially between city and country and between China and the West. Though the new Chinese entrepreneurs make millions, and corporate managers can attain salaries roughly comparable to those of peers abroad, other citizens lag far behind. Professors at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, the nation's premier art school, make about \$8,500 a year; workers in the enormous factory complexes take home some \$1,200 per annum, and millions of provincial farmers live on annual incomes of under \$800.

For all its recent industrial gains, China remains preponderantly an agricultural country, with 60 percent of the populace (nearly 800 million people) now living in rural areas. Only about 20 percent of the land is arable, and subsistence is still the goal for many. Consequently, up to 150 million people in a marginal "floating population" seek day labor in cities where they have no official residency status. At the lowest economic level, 135 million people currently live on less than \$1 a day—some 80 million earning under \$185 per year, and half of those less than \$152 (or about 40 cents per day).

These disparities feed a national preoccupation with China's place in the world—a matter of both pride and concern, and an implicit theme in a great deal of contemporary art. When and how will the New China assume its proper place as a global power? Will it do so by emulating Euro-American models and eventually beating the West at its own "modernization" game? Or will the country cunningly subsume all foreign influences into its own deeply rooted tradition, as it has done so many times before in its 5,000-year history as the world's oldest (and arguably most refined) major civilization?

Past and Present

China's long evolution from folk culture to dynastic rule to incipient modernization to Communist authoritarianism to market fervor (see the appendix, "History Lessons") yields a strange psychic mix in which cultural nostalgia and ruthless futurism, nationalistic loyalty, and avid globalism perpetually contend. Massive recent changes have left post-Tiananmen artists spiritually unmoored—looking out for themselves and their families in a skeptical, utterly pragmatic society striving for normalcy (and hoping for affluence) in the aftermath of a cultural cataclysm. For ironically, Mao Zedong, having set out to establish a Communist utopia, inadvertently paved the way—at a cost of forty to seventy million peacetime lives—for a postmodern society par excellence.

Certain vestiges of Old China have not been entirely lost, despite determined efforts to eradicate them in the middle of the last century. Folktales and ghost

stories are still retold; animism and shamanism persist in guises such as non-empirical Chinese medicine, astrological charts, fortunetellers, marriage readers, and feng shui. The lunar calendar functions alongside the Gregorian. In temples, now treated as living museums, one still finds aged shrines to such beings as the Local Town God.

Neither early modernism, nor later Maoism, nor today's money fever has completely extinguished China's previous major belief systems. Confucianism, founded in the sixth century B.C. and rising to prominence three hundred years later, based social order and harmony on a system of hierarchical fealty, with youths admonished to give respect and obedience to older persons, women to men, subjects to officials, and officials (after the advent of the Mandate of Heaven) to their superiors in a ladder of authority leading ultimately to the emperor.

In approximately the fifth century B.C. (ancient sources conflict on the date), Lao-tzu is said to have established the doctrine of Tao, or the Way, a state of mind and method of behavior meant to put one into accord with the natural flow of all existence by emphasizing forbearance, patience, and nonaction (*wu wei*). Buddhism, entering China from India in the first century A.D., brought the goal of Nirvana, a spiritually elevated escape from cyclical reincarnation and suffering through the elimination of worldly desire. Buddhist art, from the paintings and sculptures of the thousand-temple Dunghuan caves, begun in the fourth century A.D., to the ornate structures of the late imperial period, has provided great visual stimulus to Chinese artists up to the current day. Islam first reached China in 651 A.D. and is today the core religion of several ethnic minorities. Christianity, after small incursions in the seventh and sixteenth centuries, gained a foothold with the involuntary opening of China in the mid-1800s.

Mao, of course, enforced atheism from 1949 onward. Under his successor, Deng Xiaoping, freedom of religion was finally legislated in 1978, although faith is still deemed incompatible with membership in the Communist Party. More recently the government, for the sake of national heritage, has worked to restore many temples and religious sites. These days, allowing for overlaps between Buddhism and other practices,

about 30 percent of the population is Taoist, 8 percent Buddhist (although 70 percent occasionally participate in the rituals), 4 percent Christian, and 2 percent Muslim.

For avant-garde artists—as for many of the urban, educated, post-Mao young—these belief systems are residual and attenuated at best, sources of occasionally useful cultural forms, or perhaps of wishful sentiments, more than personal convictions. On the international art circuit, Old China constitutes a handy image repertoire. Whenever an unmistakable touch of Chineseness is needed, one can salt a show with pagoda tops and Bodhi statues—about as meaningful to the vanguard Chinese artists who use them as the face of Mao was to Warhol or a crucifix is to the average artist in Brooklyn.

Of greater consequence, even for the most radical Chinese conceptualist today, is the long legacy of fine art. In the ancient social ranking, notes the 1996 *Grove Dictionary of Art*, intellectuals (including artists) occupied the eighth of nine descending grades, one notch below peasants and one above beggars. Over the millennia, their fortunes varied, but even when art was distinguished from craft, only painters were admitted (third in rank) to the more exalted company of poets and calligraphers, while sculptors, ceramists, and metalworkers—because of the common materiality of their endeavors—remained mere artisans.

Vernacular art was carried on by tradesmen whose motifs and techniques were so codified that they could often be memorized and transmitted in rhymed formulas. Court art, while infinitely more refined, was often stymied by the artists' fear of drawing adverse notice or raising suspicion of involvement in political intrigue. The art of the nonprofessional literati, scholars who regarded their ink-brush images as a species of literature, was addressed to a small audience of fellow initiates. Like calligraphers, the literati believed (along with the population at large) that personal intellect, spirituality, and moral worth were conveyed by the manner in which the conventions of the medium were executed. Brushmanship, in essence, bespoke character.

So ingrained—and so esteemed—was this soul-to-hand correlation that for some 1,800 years mastery of



calligraphy and the literary classics, along with more mundane administrative knowledge, was a central component of the civil service examinations that allowed candidates from every region and (in theory at least) every clan, family, and social rank to compete for administrative posts in the imperial bureaucracy. These rigorous exams (the success rate hovered around 2 percent) have their modern-day echo in the killingly competitive screening system for colleges, universities, and art academies in China.

Beijing's Central Academy, which had about 200 students during the 1980s, when today's avant-garde emerged, now boasts an enrollment of 4,000, though it admits only about 10 percent of applicants. The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, with 6,000 students, accepts only 3 percent of those who apply. When one takes into account the 7,000 students at the China Art Academy in Hangzhou, and those at the schools in Hubei and Guangzhou, China's top academies are turning out a total of about 6,000 trained artists a year. In all, some 208,000 young people are currently enrolled in the nation's 300 university-level art programs. The sheer numbers, not to mention the Chinese names, befuddle Westerners who are eager to keep abreast of China's art world.

In a 1942 address in Yan'an, Mao incorporated artists into the proletarian movement and later, when in

power, made them part of the great propaganda machine for Chinese socialism and his own exalted persona. How and why artists have regained their individuality, and the details of their differences, is the story in these pages.

Forms of Freedom

Broadly speaking, the changes that shaped today's art—a deregulation of both style and content—occurred in distinct, wavelike phases. Avant-garde stirrings began even before Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of the late 1970s. The No Name Group—a largely self-taught, clandestine, and literally unnamed band of about twenty artists who painted in various nonpolitical, post-Impressionist styles—originated at the Xihua Fine Arts Institute in 1959. Members held a private home exhibition in 1974 (the first known unofficial show), began to display their work publicly in 1979, and remained active until the early 1980s.

At the end of the 1970s China experienced a moment of political openness known as the Beijing Spring. "Seeking truth from facts" was briefly encouraged, in order to point out the errors of Deng's rivals and predecessors, especially the Gang of Four (see appendix), and to encourage improvements in current

governance. A physical symbol of this policy was the Democracy Wall, a stretch of brick masonry near a bus depot in Beijing where, beginning in December 1978, ordinary citizens could post political comments and complaints. Within days, a young activist named Wei Jingsheng put up a call for a Fifth Modernization—democracy—to supplement Deng's four economic overhauls. Wei, who also denounced Party corruption and advocated prison reform, was arrested in March 1979 and spent most of the next eighteen years in jail. He was deported to the United States in 1997.

The Democracy Wall itself lasted only one year, closing in December 1979 after having been moved to a park and placed under restricted access. But around the time of this brief Beijing Spring interlude, the new art of China began to appear, bolstered by the leeway granted to cultural productions by the 1978 Third Constitution of the People's Republic.

In late 1978 and early 1979 the April Photographic Society disseminated once privately hoarded images of huge protests against the Gang of Four that had taken place in Tiananmen Square in April 1976 (see Photography chapter). Meanwhile, prompted by the August 1978 publication of a short story titled "Scar," progressive artists in all disciplines started to produce works that honored the goals of the Cultural Revolution but also portrayed, in very concrete terms, the human costs of its excesses and failures. Scar painting, first exhibited in fall 1979, was vividly anecdotal in a manner, deriving from Socialist Realism but focused on physical and psychological traumas that could not previously be acknowledged. Many of the artists were former Red Guards.

On Sept. 26, 1979, murals by several artists, including Yuan Yunsheng (previously imprisoned for sixteen years as a rightist), were inaugurated at the international airport in Beijing. Free of political content, done in a purely aesthetic style replete with nudes, and evoking mythological landscapes and folklore, this large-scale public commission—the first since Mao's death in 1976—helped open up new artistic and critical possibilities, despite being partially curtailed just seven months later.

The day after the airport murals' launch, the Stars, a group of twenty to thirty young artists, was permitted



to hang works outdoors on the fence of the National Art Museum, then hosting a show marking the thirtieth anniversary of the PRC's founding. When local authorities objected, the Stars organizers posted responses on the museum fence and the Democracy Wall. On September 29 their works were impounded. The artists, egged on by political activists, replied with another message on the Democracy Wall and on October 1 marched in protest under banners proclaiming slogans such as "Demand Political Democracy, Demand Artistic Freedom!" Surprisingly, they were granted a ten-day exhibition at a hall belonging to the Beijing Artists' Association. The show (November 23–December 2, 1979) drew forty thousand visitors and engendered a second approved exhibition the following year (August 20–September 4, 1980).

Although many of the Stars artists left China in the early 1980s, they had already established the go-your-own-way model that liberal artists in China have

adopted ever since. After the Stars shows, formal experimentation, though still officially disdained in the art academies, began to build among recent graduates (divided between advocates of rationalistic and expressionistic modes), culminating in the second half of the 1980s in a concatenation of movements, groups, shows, and individual endeavors known as the '85 New Wave. That phenomenon was celebrated in *China/Avant-Garde*, an exhibition of 293 works by 186 artists, curated by critics Gao Minglu, Li Xianting, and others at the National Art Museum in 1989. Slated to run for two weeks (February 5–19), it was shut down twice for a total of eight days: first, within hours after its opening, due to the use of live gunfire in an artist's performance; second, because of bomb threats (see *Sculpture & Installation and Performance* chapters). Four months later, the Tiananmen Square showdown took place.

It is no accident that the first major surges of avant-garde art and the democracy movement coincided. Both were made possible by the same loosening of strictures, the same influx of information from abroad, the same impatience with authoritarianism and conformity, the same eagerness to embrace new ways of behaving and being. And both promulgated their message of liberation not only through statements, manifestos, and communiqués but also through galvanizing images. (Who can forget the Goddess of Democracy, or the daring young man standing defiantly in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square?)

Today's artists are, in psychological terms, heirs of the June 4 Movement—if one holds that the ultimate aim of that cultural revolt was the assertion of individual worth and the pursuit of individual meaning. The avant-guardists do not, however, share either the political intent or the reckless bravery of the Tiananmen organizers. The cruel lesson of June 4, 1989, is that repression sometimes works—at least for a considerable period. In the two decades since the massacre critics of the regime have been routinely jailed while those who hold their tongues, dodging and weaving in response to shifting regulations, have survived and prospered. Critical imagery remains oblique: it is at most focused on troublesome social conditions and visible manifestations of governmental failings, but it rarely conveys direct political criticism or protest.

Immediately after Tiananmen, the avant-garde went private again, with artists making work for each other and exhibiting, when they could, more or less on the sly. Yet by 1993 they were already congregating in fraternal (though, pointedly, not collective) living and working spaces—called artist “villages”—on the margins of respectable society. With Chinese officialdom eyeing them askance and no domestic galleries to carry their work until late in the decade, they developed an oddly internationalist mindset: they were proudly Chinese and passionately involved in internal critical debates, yet also attuned to global art-world currents and selling (though rarely and at meager prices) only abroad or to foreigners living in China. Some artists were able, with considerable bureaucratic difficulty, to travel or study outside the PRC, especially once international curators began to mount surveys of recent Chinese art. (To this day, there remains in some circles an ingrained skepticism about those “overseas Chinese” artists who opted for long-term residence abroad or were born of émigré parents.)

The shift to the Chinese art environment of today, with its frenetic activity and get-rich-quick mentality (see The chapter “Scene Now”), began with the new millennium. The third Shanghai Biennale in 2000, the first to go truly international, is often cited as a turning point—especially since its renegade, artist-run satellite shows drew more intense critical reaction than the official event. Most noted of those half-dozen exhibitions was *Fuck Off* (or *Uncooperative Attitude* in its less abrasive Mandarin version), a display of boundary-pushing works by forty-seven artists, organized by artist-provocateur Ai Weiwei and independent curator Feng Boyi at Shanghai's alternative Eastlink Gallery.

Authorities closed *Fuck Off* a few days after its opening, and oversight of exhibitions became stricter for a year or two. But gradually, more and more commercial galleries opened in China, progressive work came into ever greater demand from dealers and curators, and critics everywhere started to treat the work with fascination and respect. As a result, officials in the PRC began to change their view, especially after international collectors grew excited and global auction houses opened new departments dedicated

to the highly profitable resale of contemporary Chinese art.

Exhibitions are now much less frequently and less severely censored, and the overall atmosphere in the Chinese art world is freewheeling within broad, reasonable limits (no direct political criticism, no really raunchy sex). Permission to travel flows easily these days to artists who can bring substantial income back to the mainland. And the perception of a free cultural domain clearly serves the nation's long-term business and diplomatic goals. In short, the government, which once promoted mostly tradition-based work both as a compensation for the now-renounced Cultural Revolution and as an assertion of national identity, has today, however grudgingly, come to value avant-garde art as part of a soft power strategy to enhance China's global status.

Under Western Eyes

China's vanguard art is frequently seen from abroad (and sometimes at home) as merely illustrative of ethnography, politics, market trends, or critical theory. A series of short-lived styles and associations—such as Cynical Realism, Gaudy Art, Political Pop, and so on—has been promoted, in a process that scholar-curator Wu Hung, writing in the catalog of the First Guangzhou Triennial, identified with a Cultural Revolution—style fusion of agenda, propaganda, and organization (though it also bears eerie resemblance to a Western marketing blitz).

The focus of this book is more concrete, based on the conviction that artworks are generated by individuals, working with particular materials, under their own set of circumstances. Surveying progressive Chinese art from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the present, this account is tied to no single artist, exhibition, movement, or collection. Artists individually examined are of two frequently overlapping types: those who have, by critical consensus, emerged as essential to international understanding, and those I find to be the most visually and conceptually compelling. For the reader's convenience, the text is segmented into chapters by medium, with artists assigned according to the

type of work for which they are best known. It is important to note, however, that contemporary practitioners in China are extremely eclectic—appropriating whatever ideas and techniques they like, regardless of source, and often working with equal fluency in several diverse mediums. The PRC is full of painters who also make sculpture, performance artists who present their work in photographs and videos, and artists who use cameras but do not style themselves photographers.

In the three decades covered here (1978–2008), progressive Chinese art has been—like so much else in China—a veritable boys' club, accommodating only a few women artists, critics, and curators. So whenever a woman is named in this text, a gender-signaling pronoun will soon follow; all other subjects are male.

The titling and dating of works is another vexed issue. Until very recently, avant-garde artists in China, working without official recognition or gallery-system discipline, tended to be extremely lax in their record-keeping. Studios grew cluttered, and when rare exhibition opportunities arose, works were often identified from memory or on the whim of the moment. Moreover, many Chinese artists—particularly since the market has become superheated—tend to make numerous copies or variants of their signature pieces. Add to this the wrinkles of translation (Should Geng Jianyi's famous faces be called *Second Situation* or *Second State*?), and it is not unusual now to find the same work bearing two or three different names or dates in various sources. In most instances here, only the most commonly cited title and date are given, and the joys of one-upmanship are left to future investigators.

Indeed, the core concern of this book lies elsewhere—in the realm of the visual and interpretive. An implicit question—simple but hopefully enlightening—undergirds every page: Why do these Chinese works look the way they do? In each case—whether the prime determinant is formal, historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, biographical, or aesthetic—the goal is one: to understand the art as art, in light of the artist's conscious and subliminal motives and the viewers' responses as those factors translate into critical discourse in the world beyond China.