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Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Ha Yoon Jung

Committee in charge:

Professor Kuiyi Shen, Chair  
Professor Norman Bryson  
Professor Todd Henry  
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Professor Mariana Wardwell

2014



The Dissertation of Ha Yoon Jung is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

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“Abstraction in 1980s Shanghai: Li Shan's abstract paintings,” *Journal of History of*

*Modern Art*, no. 33 (June, 2013): 27-48

“A Meeting Place of the West and East: the work of Yoo Young-Kuk,” *Misulshakbo*,  
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai

by

Ha Yoon Jung

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Kuiyi Shen, Chair

My dissertation, “Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai,” examines political, conceptual, historical, and formal aspects of abstract paintings produced in Shanghai from 1976 to 1989. This study argues that Shanghai abstract paintings were

formulated in the unique historical and sociopolitical context of post-Mao Shanghai and, thus, have unique characteristics that do not always fit the conventional definition of abstract art. More specifically, it studies what kind of ideological meaning that abstract art held in the People's Republic of China (PRC), how the 1980s Chinese art circle defined abstract art, which cultural and historical background existed that allowed 1980s Shanghai abstract art to blossom, and how five select Shanghai artists, namely Li Shan (李山 b. 1942), Zhang Jianjun (张健君 b. 1955), Qiu Deshu (仇德树 b. 1948), Yu Youhan (余友涵 b. 1943), and Ding Yi (丁乙 b. 1962), each expressed their own understanding of abstract art through their paintings. Through this study, I ultimately aim to reveal that there are multiple versions of abstract art that are incongruent with its institutional description, thereby expanding our understanding of abstract art.

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter, an introduction, establishes the problem with the canonization of the term, “abstract art,” and the single narrative of its history; provides a historical background of 1980s China; explains the modern art history of Shanghai; and locates this study in the broad range of scholarship. The four subsequent chapters focus on the ideological meaning of Chinese abstract art constructed by China's socialist identity; the discourses of abstract art in 1980s China; the unique cultural history of Shanghai; and the artworks of five representative Shanghai abstract artists.

I conduct extensive visual analyses of abstract paintings and scrutinize

historical, social, political, and cultural aspects of 1980s Shanghai. As the first English publication on 1980s abstract art in China, my dissertation sheds light on one of the most significant, yet often overlooked, if not neglected, concepts in not only the global history of abstract art but also the art of modern China.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

My dissertation, “Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai,” examines political, conceptual, historical, and formal aspects of abstract paintings produced in Shanghai from 1976 to 1989. More specifically, it studies what kind of ideological meaning that abstract art held in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), how the 1980s Chinese art circle defined abstract art, which cultural and historical background existed that allowed 1980s Shanghai abstract art to blossom, and how five select Shanghai artists, namely Li Shan (李山 b. 1942), Zhang Jianjun (张健君 b. 1955), Qiu Deshu (仇德树 b. 1948), Yu Youhan (余友涵 b. 1943), and Ding Yi (丁乙 b. 1962), each expressed their own understanding of abstract art through their paintings.

Judging from conventional art history, abstract art already seemed to be outdated in the early 1980s. However, in China, abstract art emerged as one of the new arts in the late 1970s. This temporal gap is due to China’s unique historical background. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) ended when its architect, Mao Zedong (毛泽东 1893-1976), died in 1976, which led to the end of the uniform, propagandist style of socialist realism as different themes and styles of art slowly emerged. The variety of art was accelerated as the Chinese art world not only aggressively embraced the massive amount of information about Western modern art entering through the wide open doors to Europe and America but also attempted to rediscover their traditional, local art with respect. With this warm cultural wind at their

back, young artists passionately experimented with new art, making the 1980s one of the most diverse and culturally enthusiastic periods in Chinese art history. Against this background, abstract art arose as one of the major new arts among young Chinese artists.

Although abstract art was discussed and produced nationwide, Shanghai functioned as the hub of 1980s abstract art in China. As an exclusive city, where discussions about the concept of abstract art and its production had already been realized in the Republican era (1911-1949), 1980s Shanghai saw a great number of artists experimenting with abstract art. Also, a large number of exhibitions about abstract art were organized in Shanghai, making this city its center in the 1980s.

Focusing on this specific time and place, I will argue that 1980s Shanghai abstract art was formulated in the unique historical and sociopolitical context of post-Mao Shanghai. This argument is based on the premise that abstract art has heterogeneous meanings and histories in different regions at different times and that 1980s Shanghai abstract art is one local version of abstract art among many others. Through this study, I ultimately aim to reveal that there are multiple versions of abstract art that do not always fit into its institutional description, and, thus, expand our understanding of abstract art.

As an introduction, Chapter One will introduce the topic and methodology of this dissertation. It will first establish the problem posed by the conventional usage of the term, “abstract art,” and the single narrative of its history. Then it will provide the backdrop of 1980s Shanghai abstract art by briefly explaining the social, political, and

cultural background of 1980s China and some special historical aspects of Shanghai. Chapter One will also locate this study in the topography of scholarship in the field of Chinese art history, Asian modern art history, and the relationship between art and politics in the PRC.

### *Abstract Art*

Art dictionaries published in England and the U.S.A. define abstract art as an artwork that does not represent the real world. For example, *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* defines abstract art as “art that does not depict recognizable scenes or objects, but instead is made up of forms and colours that exist for their own expressive sake.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, *The Yale Dictionary of Art and Artists* defines abstract art as “art that does not represent aspects of the visible world,”<sup>2</sup> and *The Phaidon Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art* explains that “the twentieth-century concept of ‘abstract art’ is an art devoid of figurative images which does not seek to represent other visual experiences.”<sup>3</sup>

These dictionary definitions were constructed by considering only Western European and North American art history. To illustrate, abstract art was defined as

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Chilvers ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Erika Langmuir and Norbert Lynton, *The Yale Dictionary of Art and Artists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>3</sup> *The Phaidon Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art* (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 1973), 1.

nonrepresentational work, because dictionary writers regarded abstract art as a rebellion by early twentieth-century European artists against the Renaissance's legacy of illusionism. That is, to reject the concept of art as simply imitation of the world, early twentieth century European artists expelled recognizable objects and scenery from their work, thus rendering the new work models of abstract art. This logic is explicitly expressed in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, as it notes "in normal usage, the term [abstract art] refers to modern painting and sculpture that abandon the traditional European conception of art as the imitation of nature and make little or no reference to the external visual world."<sup>4</sup>

Descriptions of the history of abstract art are also focused on Western Europe and the United States. All of above-mentioned art dictionaries describe that abstract art was invented by early twentieth-century European artists in order to encompass the fundamental changes taking place in technology, science, and philosophy at the time. They commonly give credit to Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) as the pioneers of abstract art and argue that the glory of their invention continued to Abstract Expressionism in the United States and Art Informel in Western Europe in the mid-twentieth century.

The problem lies in the fact that these art dictionaries do not mention that their explanations cover only European and North American abstract art. This eliminates the possibility of other definitions and histories of abstract art in different locations and times, and, thus, universalizes a very particular version of abstract art. That is, the

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Chilvers ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 2.

most authoritative and generally accepted definitions of abstract art are, in fact, highly Eurocentric and have established Euro-American abstract art as the canon.

The canonized explanation of abstract art was first formulated in the United States, especially by Alfred Barr Jr. (1901~1981), the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, with his landmark show, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, in 1936. In its catalogue, Barr defined “abstract” as the term most frequently used to describe the more extreme effects of the impulse away from “nature.” Barr’s concept of abstract art was quite broad and included both “near-abstractions,” which still contained some suggestive figures, and “pure-abstractions,” which consisted only of pictorial elements.<sup>5</sup> Barr justified his range of abstract art by referencing the meanings of the word “abstract.” Just like the word abstract had the implications of both a verb, “to abstract,” which meant to draw out of or away from, and the noun, “abstraction,” which was something already drawn out of or away from, abstract art could indicate paintings that are both on the way to, and the result of, abstraction. That means Barr considered both Malevich’s “Black Square,” which has no dependence upon natural forms, and the works of Jean Arp and Pablo Picasso with their vestiges of subject matter, as abstract paintings.

With this spectrum of abstract art, Barr defined two main currents of abstract art.<sup>6</sup> One is intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear and classical

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Barr Jr., “Introduction,” in *Cubism and Abstract Art* (the Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

in its austerity and dependence upon logic and circulation, which emerged from Impressionism and passed through Cubism and the geometrical and Constructivist movements. The second current is intuitional and emotional, organic, curvilinear, decorative, and romantic in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous and the irrational, which started with Gauguin, continued to Fauvism, Abstract Expressionism, and Kandinsky, and became associated with Surrealism. His diagram seems very logical and clear. The problem with this flow of abstract art is that Barr intentionally or accidentally excluded the possibility of other abstract art that locates beyond this linear genealogy. What he was concerned with was the linear tradition only within early twentieth-century Europe and America. This problematic diagram has been passed down to the next generations of art critics and has gained in authority.

The most influential contributor who championed abstract art as Euro-American Modernism is perhaps the American art critic, Clement Greenberg (1909~1994). His foremost argument was that art had to exhibit unique and irreducible qualities not only in art in general, but also in each particular style of art.<sup>7</sup> For the unique, Greenberg wanted visual art to be exclusively visual, arguing for expelling all literature from fine art. In a similar vein, he distinguished each genre of art, emphasizing uniqueness in the nature of its medium. Therefore, to Greenberg, Modernist painting has to be flat. In regards to the irreducible, the very basic elements

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<sup>7</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting." This article appeared first in 1960 as a pamphlet in a series published by the *Voice of America*. It was broadcast over that agency's radio in the spring of the same year. With some minor verbal changes, it was reprinted in *Art and Literature* in Paris in the spring of 1965 and then in Gregory Battcock's anthology, *The New Art* (1966).

of visual art, such as lines and colors, should dominate the entire work. Emphasizing that Modernism does not mean a break with the past, Greenberg constructed his theory based on the Kantian notion and historicized Modernist painting from sixteenth-century Venetian artists' efforts to rid paintings of the sculptural to the twentieth-century French artists, Manet and Picasso, and to the American Expressionists. Greenberg's concept of abstract art was much stricter than Barr's, but, just like Barr, Greenberg identified abstract art as a Western (in his case, European and American) modern product.

Recently in 2013, the MoMA in New York City organized a grand exhibition titled *Inventing Abstraction, 1913-18*. Its curator, Leah Dickerman, in some ways has reversed Barr and Greenberg by emphasizing the interdisciplinary connections among European and American polemicists (critics, editors, exhibition makers) and artists, but she has still maintained a full respect for the Eurocentric historiography of abstract art. With a very narrow definition of abstract art, which is, to borrow her words, art with "no discernible subject matter," the exhibition described abstract art as the European and American "invention" of the early twentieth-century.<sup>8</sup> Against the backdrop of the specific time and space, namely a broad epistemological shift of modern thinking, nonempirical methodologies (Quantum study, relativity), semiotic theories of language, modern media culture, and Cubism (a radical assault on the traditional relationship in painting between figures and surrounding space, and their

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<sup>8</sup> Leah Dickerman, "Inventing Abstraction," *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 13, 18.

thought that vision is unreliable for pictorial realism, turning away from the world), the introductory article by Leah Dickerman once again confirmed that abstract art was a genuine invention and destined outcome of the modern society of Europe and the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, described as the genuine invention of early twentieth-century Euro-American modernity, abstract art has been defined as totally new art that deviated from the illusionistic tradition of the Renaissance and that pursued absolute spiritual or formalistic purity.

Although this Euro-America-centered definition and historiography of abstract art are widely accepted and officially used, abstract art is by no means the exclusive heritage of twentieth-century European or American art. Abstract art has, in fact, been created in many other areas before, during, and after the twentieth-century, and each local version has different contexts, histories, and meanings.

As many art historians have constantly argued since the 1980s, the European artists were not the first to expel recognizable figures from the canvas. They were preceded by the people of the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Ages and by later Tantric and Islamic artists who eliminated illusionistic representation in favor of different types and levels of abstraction. As cultural critic Roger Denson argued, even if such creations were largely functional and ritualistic, they were no less conceived

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<sup>9</sup> Leah Dickerman further argues that early twentieth-century Euro-American abstract art was the root of contemporary art, finding similar characteristics between the two.

and produced with an aesthetic sensibility.<sup>10</sup> It is, thus, never legitimate to call abstract art the original invention of European modernity.

Moreover, during the twentieth-century, abstract art was created not only in Europe and North America but also in various cities in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Each local art world has developed its unique version of abstract art, each with different backgrounds and intentions. Given that, a single narrative of abstract art is certainly wrong. Numerous abstract works in different areas and periods deny the notion that abstract art is the outcome of European modernity and, thus, urge us to (re)examine and (re)write the histories of abstract art.

The Euro-America-centric description of abstract art is more problematic, because it produces a false value system in the arts, leading people to think that the artworks that fit the canon of abstract art are authentic but the others are secondary. It further enhances the original-secondary, influencing-influenced, royal-hybrid, center-periphery model between modern art of “the West” (Western Europe and the United States) and “the others.” To dispel this biased view, it is necessary to give sufficient attention to the abstract art created outside of Europe and North America.

Therefore, I concentrate on one of those “peripheries” of abstract art, 1980s Shanghai. This study will demonstrate that a region that has been commonly thought to be on the periphery of abstract art has a unique history and meaning of abstract art

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<sup>10</sup> G. Roger Denson, “Colonizing Abstraction: MoMA's *Inventing Abstraction* Show Denies Its Ancient Global Origins” *Huffington Post*, February 15, 2013. *Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/g-roger-denson/colonizing-abstraction-mo\\_b\\_2683159.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/g-roger-denson/colonizing-abstraction-mo_b_2683159.html) (accessed March 12, 2013).

and that there are various versions of abstract art that have previously been written out of the official narrative of it. It will do this by studying the ideological meanings imbued into Chinese abstract art; the unique concept of abstract art constructed by the 1980s Chinese art circle; the specific historical and cultural background of Shanghai; and Shanghai artists' abstract paintings.

To be clear, however, this dissertation is never an attempt to construct a China-centered history of abstract art, neither is its goal to make another center of art history. What this study aims for is to reconceptualize the story of abstract art from a wider understanding of art by taking 1980s Shanghai abstract paintings, one example of many different versions of abstract art that have been eliminated from institutional art history, as a case study.

### *1980s China and its Art*

During the last several years of the 1970s, the entire sphere of Chinese society was dramatically changed, which came with the death of China's forever Chairman Mao Zedong on September 9, 1976. His chosen successor, Hua Guofeng (华国锋 1921-2008), was briefly in the top leadership role, but Deng Xiaoping (邓小平 1904-1997) took over power in 1978 at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (十一届三中全会).<sup>11</sup> At this meeting, Deng proclaimed modernization and economic developments as his Party's primary

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<sup>11</sup> For detailed information on the transition from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, see Maurice Meisner's *The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism, 1978-1994* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 61-103.

goal. As a result, drastic reforms were designed and carried out by the Party, creating upheaval in the economy, foreign relations, politics, and culture of the PRC.

In the field of economics, one of the most influential reforms was the opening of China's doors in 1979, which opened the country to foreign capital for the first time in decades. In 1979, a joint venture law was promulgated, special economic zones were established in coastal areas, and China began to seek foreign aid from countries like Japan as well as from international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.<sup>12</sup> Also, agricultural reforms, price reforms, wage reforms, and the establishment of a factory and enterprise system were also launched, vitalizing the Chinese economy.<sup>13</sup>

Major economic reforms of the socialist state called for revision of the national ideology. Opposing opinions over prioritizing the practices of the new leadership versus adhering to the Maoist directives of the conservative Party members arose in the late 1970s. The former faction insisted that Deng's practical reforms did not harm China's socialist identity, while the latter argued that they actually contradicted the national foundations that Mao Zedong had built. This problem was resolved in 1981 when Deng Xiaoping, who had already consolidated his power and did not want to completely negate Mao, adopted a compromise formula proclaiming that Mao had made mistakes at the end of his life but that "Mao Zedong Thought"

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Y. S. Cheng, ed. *China: Modernization in the 1980s* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), xi.

<sup>13</sup> More information on Deng Xiaoping's reform can be found in Immanuel C. Y. Hsü's *The Rise of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 841-871.

should still be upheld.

Political, economic, and ideological reforms certainly influenced the cultural realm, making noticeable changes from the Maoist period. One of the most striking aspects was the overwhelming amount of imported cultural works from abroad, especially from Western Europe. Hundreds of books of twentieth-century European philosophy, social sciences, humanities, and art were translated into Chinese, published and made available to hungry readers across China. The translated works ranged from those of Husserl, Heidegger, Jung, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Popper, Marcuse and Adorno to Habermas, Ricoeur, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, and Chinese writers, critics, and artists fervently read them. Modern European and American art history and art theory, including works by Herbert Read, H. W. Janson, H. H. Arnason, L. Venturi, Heinrich Wofflin, Erwin Panofsky, E. H. Gombrich, George Santayana, Robin George Collingwood, Rudolf Arnheim, and Clement Greenberg, became known to many young Chinese art critics and artists by the early 1980s.

This massive importation and wide circulation of foreign intellectual and cultural works was combined with the rediscovery of early Chinese art, such as the introduction of ancient Chinese texts, a series of archaeological projects that unearthed early Chinese art, and the publication of articles in art journals with images about early Chinese art. New information about foreign and local art created one of the most amazing phenomena in 1980s China, the “Great Cultural Discussion,” which is simply called the “Cultural fever” (文化热). Young Chinese writers, artists, and intellectuals

generated vigorous discussions about ways to formulate modern Chinese culture that would fit in the new era, dealing with the new, Euro-American influx and with traditional, local art. As a young and passionate generation, they believed that their discussions and cultural works could contribute to building an ideal, new Chinese society.

In the visual art field, Chinese artists started to explore various styles and themes that became newly available after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Stimulated by abundant information from outside China and a relatively loosened political control over art, artists organized many art groups by themselves in various cities across China. As early as the late 1970s, for example, so-called Scar Art (伤痕艺术) depicted previously taboo subjects, such as the wounds of the Cultural Revolution, using realistic techniques. In Beijing, artists formed a group in summer 1979, which called itself the Oil Painting Research Association (北京油画研究会). Its big October exhibition in Beihai Park, which subsequently went on tour to Guangzhou, Wuhan, Changsha, Hangzhou, and Shanghai, included diverse themes and styles, such as expressionist or surrealist portrait, landscape, still life, and nude paintings. In September of the same year, the Star group (星星画会) hung their experimental works on the fence and the trees outside the Chinese National Art Gallery, protesting for freedom of artistic expression.

Although academies still favored realist styles in the mid-1980s, an experimental spirit propagated quickly, alongside the growing number of regional and

national art magazines and nationwide symposia. According to Chinese art historian Gao Minglu, seventy nine self-organized, avant-garde art groups emerged in a single year, 1985.<sup>14</sup> Some of the more well-known groups scattered across China include the Northern Art Group (北方艺术全体) in Harbin,<sup>15</sup> the Pool Society (池社) in Hangzhou,<sup>16</sup> and Xiamen Dada (厦门达达) in Fujian.<sup>17</sup> Artists in different cities exchanged their ideas through journal articles, exhibitions, and symposia, creating a heavy flow of new art. These artists' groups had different members with different styles and themes, but there were common components among them: they completely rejected the Maoist doctrine that art should serve politics, pursued artistic freedom, and searched for a new art through which they could realize their utopian and idealist dreams for a new China.

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<sup>14</sup> Gao Minglu 高名潞, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press; London: in association with China Art Foundation, 2011), 101-102.

<sup>15</sup> Martina Koppel Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004), 60. The Northern Art Group (北方艺术全体) was established in July 1984 and included 15 members, including Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, Ren Jian and Liu Yan. They propagated the so-called Rational Painting (Lixing huihua), a style that emphasizes the reduction of formal elements, a clean and cold language, as well as a mystic and detached atmosphere.

<sup>16</sup> The Hangzhou-based, self-organized group called the Pool Society (池社) was founded in 1985. Its members' work included paintings, installations, and performances. The members often chose everyday urban life materials as their painting subjects and reduced form, color, and movement to symbolize the alienation of the individual in the urban centers impregnated by Deng Xiaoping's modernization program. Ibid, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Referring to the Southern school of Chan-Buddhism and Dadaism, the members of the Xiamen-based group, Xiamen Dada (厦门达达), adopted the notions of spontaneity, doubt, the illogical and the radical.

Unlike these pioneers of new art at the time, Shanghai abstract artists did not organize a group, and, thus, are often left out of the group-oriented historiography of Chinese modern art. However, abstract art was certainly one of the most important topics during the 1980s, and I argue that abstract art should be considered with more gravity as a major component of the new art phenomenon of 1980s China. Abstract art was new to young Chinese artists and audiences as much as installation, performance, or conceptual art. Also, abstract artists vigorously challenged the theoretical primacy of Mao's claim that art is subordinate to politics by refusing to depict political themes and by opposing the figurative and the realistic. Their works seem to be gentle and silent, but the rebelling, experimental, and idealistic spirit was the same as other Chinese avant-garde artists of the 1980s. The light now needs to be shined on abstract art, one of the most important, yet often overlooked, concepts.

### *Shanghai*

As one of the earliest opened and largest ports of China, Shanghai had become an undoubtedly exceptional modern city by the 1930s. Old faces of the city still partially remained, but the city's appearance and lifestyle were apparently different from other, more rural, Chinese cities.

The major forces that led Shanghai's modernity were probably the two foreign settlements, the International Settlement and the French Concession, which were established during the late nineteenth-century. While the International Settlement remained mainly under the control of British residents, the French Concession was

closely connected to the French government. In those concession areas of the city, British-, American- and French-style buildings and streets appeared in 1856.<sup>18</sup> British buildings were dominant along the bank of the Huangpu River, easily called as “Waitan” (外滩) or “the Bund.” The buildings were newly built or renovated according to the Neo Classical style that was in fashion in nineteenth-century England, including the British consulate, the Palace Hotel, the Shanghai Club, and the Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank. American-style buildings were also built, usually as banks, hotels, apartments, and department stores furnished with the Art Deco style that accompanied skyscrapers. In the French Concession, two- to three-story brick houses and outdoor cafes with coffee and music on the quiet and leafy streets delivered an exotic ambiance. Besides architecture, gas lamps were installed in 1865, electricity started in 1882, telephone communications began in 1881, water supply facilities were applied in 1884, cars in 1901, and trams started to run in 1908, all of which created a new, foreign, and modern ambiance.

Shanghai modernity, however, was not the exclusive domain of the residents within the settlements. Local Shanghai people could also appropriate modern city life. Newly invented European products in everyday life were imported to Shanghai so fast that a saying, “today in Paris, tomorrow in Shanghai,” was created. According to Shanghai periodicals, such as *Young Companion* [Liangyou 良友] and *Time* [Shidai

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on the architecture and urban space of Republican Shanghai, see Chapter One of Leo Ou-fan Lee’s *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3-42.

时代], Shanghai residents used new, foreign everyday supplies such as cereals, laundry soap, Dr. William's Pink Pill, records, cameras, perfume, cigarettes, ovens, electric vacuums, and MSG..

Moreover, by the 1930s, more and more local people had started to enjoy modern city life. Many Chinese shopped at department stores, danced at cabarets and dancing halls, spent time at cafeterias, went for a walk in the parks, and gambled at horse tracks. Yet it was also true that not every Shanghai local enjoyed or favored such a modern life. Some worried that foreign influences would threaten traditional or national characteristics, and others were concerned about a breakdown in morality. Some had insufficient financial resources to live in the modern way. However, Shanghai was unstoppably becoming more modern day by day, and the city became surely an exceptionally modernized city in Republican China by in the early twentieth-century.

Meanwhile, new aspects of art emerged in Shanghai. Many intellectuals who were interested in foreign culture gathered in cafeterias in the city, exchanged new trends and discussed the new arts. In the visual arts, artists were fascinated by the new style of European modern art, such as Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism. In literature and cinema, new stories about modern city life attracted the attention of writers and audience.

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the PRC in 1949, however, Shanghai's extraordinary modernity became a target of criticism. It was primarily because a modern city life was against the farm-driven economy system that

Mao's Party launched the slogan, "Captivate a city by countryside." Shanghai was labeled as the city of decadence and pleasure, and was the symbol of the humiliating history of Chinese colonization. The Party tried to wipe out the modern city life of Shanghai and, as a result, all cafeterias, cabarets, horse tracks, and department stores were closed. Art, literature, and cinema were also strictly censored by the cultural bureau of Mao's Party.

Despite its suppression, modernity survived in Shanghai. The people, history, and memories still remained there throughout the harsh decades of oppression. Most importantly, nostalgia for the glamorous history and spirit of the new was passed down underground. In the late 1970s, when the new era finally came, Shanghai's modernity began to shine again, awakening many passionate artists who had been silently waiting for their day to come.

Abstract art flourished in this exceptional, historical, modern city, Shanghai. There were many pioneers of abstract art in the Republican era who explored the new arena of art and passed down the cultural legacy to the next generations. There were extraordinary agents—people and institutions—who helped Shanghai to become the center for abstract art. The fact that Republican Shanghai had already pursued new art encouraged local artists in the 1980s to explore new visual arts, allowing them to experiment with abstract art.

### *Literature Review*

Previously, Chinese abstract art attracted relatively less attention than its

figurative paintings, performances, or installations. Although a few early exhibitions, such as *Painting the Chinese Dream* at the Smith Museum in Massachusetts (1982)<sup>19</sup> and *Chinese New Art, Post-1989* in Hong Kong and Sydney (1993),<sup>20</sup> introduced some Chinese abstract paintings, the proportion of abstract part was relatively small, and profound scholarly research did not follow.

In contrast, interest in Chinese abstract art is recently increasing, which is first noticeable through the growing number of local and international exhibitions about it.<sup>21</sup> Specifically for Shanghai abstract art, major museums in Shanghai have tried to emphasize Shanghai's central role in Chinese abstract art through exhibitions. These exhibitions include *Existence of the Immaterial* and *Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition of Invisible Existence* at Shanghai University in 1996 and 1997, respectively; *City Abstraction* in 1999; *Metaphysics*, an annual exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum from 2001 to 2003; *Speaking Abstract New World- Shanghai Abstract Art Group Exhibition* at Liu Haisu Museum in 2002; *Shanghai Abstract Art Grand Exhibition* at

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<sup>19</sup> *Painting the Chinese Dream* did not specifically aim at introducing abstract art, but curator Joan Cohen included many abstract paintings by Li Shan and Qiu Deshu.

<sup>20</sup> *Chinese New Art, Post-1989* was originally organized by Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting in Hong Kong and traveled to Australia (at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in June 1993). It had one section dedicated to abstract art under the name of "Introspection and Retreat into Formalism: New Abstract Art." This section included eight artists (six painters and two sculptors: Shen Qin, Shang Yang, Wang Chuan, Liu Ming, Xu Anming, Ding Yi, Shui Jianguo, and Fu Zhongwang).

<sup>21</sup> The most representative example is probably exhibitions produced by Gao Minglu. *Mind Space: Maximalism in Contrasts* traveled from Contrasts Gallery, Shanghai (April 30, 2010 - June 16, 2010) to University Art Gallery, University of Pittsburgh, PA (February 15, 2011 - March 18, 2011), Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, Brookville, NY (January 23, 2012 - April 7, 2012), and Richard E. Peeler Art Center, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN (September 7, 2012 - December 7, 2012).

Mingyuan Culture Center in 2004; and *Turn to Abstract* at the Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art in 2008. All of these exhibitions asserted the importance and uniqueness of Shanghai abstract art.

In academia, however, only a handful of books have been published about Chinese or Shanghai abstract art, most of which are catalogues of the above-mentioned exhibitions and books written in Chinese, such as Xu Demin's *Study of Chinese Abstract Art* [Zhongguo chouxiang yishuxue 中国抽象艺术学], Zhang Xiaoling and Meng Luxin's *Abstract Art: Another World* [Chouxiang yishu: lingyige shijie 抽象艺术: 另一个世界], and Zhao Chuan's *History of Shanghai Abstraction* [Shanghai chouxiang gushi 上海抽象故事].

The most apparent commonality among these studies is a passion to highlight the distinctiveness of Chinese abstract art from its Western counterparts. For example, Xu Demin insisted that contemporary Chinese abstract art was influenced by Western art, but Chinese artists successfully localized and nationalized it owing to the inherent Chinese “blood of abstraction” be found in ancient Chinese culture, such as Oracle bone script, Chinese calligraphy, and patterns on Neozoic colored earthenware.<sup>22</sup> Chinese art historians Zhang Xiaoling and Meng Luxin also emphasized Chinese localization of Western abstract art in their book, *Abstract Art: Another World*. They argued that China's own historical, social, and political factors made Chinese abstract

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<sup>22</sup> Xu Demin 许德民, *Chinese Abstract Art Study* [Zhongguo chouxiang yishu xue 中国抽象艺术学] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2009), 41-74.

art have the value of cultural criticism, unlike Western formalist abstract works.<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein, Gao Minglu emphasized different conceptual foundations of Chinese and Euro-American abstract art. He argued that Chinese abstract art cannot be defined simply as a Western type of modernist aesthetic, because it neither pursues modernist utopia like early twentieth-century European modernism nor conceptually overwrites the material's substance like 1960s American minimalism.<sup>24</sup>

Emphasis on the uniqueness of Chinese abstract art handsomely dovetails with the recent moves of Asian art studies. Drawing upon valuable insights from post-colonial studies, art historians of Asian modern art, such as Geeta Kapur (1991), John Clark (1993), T.K. Sabapathy (1996), Jim Supangkat (1996), and Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (2007), have argued for the distinctiveness of non-Western cultures and have urged respect for each region's own context.<sup>25</sup> Their studies have successfully demonstrated disparate characteristics of different regions, contributing to correct a misconception of Asian modern art that it is belated, inferior, and secondary to European and American modern art, and to escape from the Euro-American-centric view.

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<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 1-3 "Localization and Individualization" in Zhang Xiaoling (张晓凌) and Meng Luxin (孟禄新)'s book, *Abstract Art: Another World* [Chouxiang yishu: ling yige shijie 抽象艺术: 另一个世界] (Jilin: Jilinmeishuchunamshe, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant Garde in Twentieth-century Chinese Art*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Aihwa Ong and Donald Noninis' articles were published in *Underground Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Others were published in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007).

Keeping pace with this tendency, “Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai” will strive to analyze distinctive characteristics of Shanghai abstract art produced in its own context. By considering its historical, social, political, and cultural background, I will prove that Shanghai abstract art is a unique art that has its own value and will further challenge a prejudice of “secondary, belated, inferior” Chinese or Asian modern art.

However, I do not seek to support the notion of the superiority of Chinese abstract art.<sup>26</sup> To assert the superiority of Chinese abstract art has a pitfall of disrespecting other local versions of abstraction, which is an improper attempt to move the center from the West to Asia, or to China. Studies on regionality should not constitute a power struggle but should suggest an objective viewpoint to analyze every single distinctive art style. My work is based on the belief that 1980s Shanghai abstract art is equally interesting as art from different periods and different regions. I regard 1980s Shanghai abstract art as one local version among many others, all of which have different meanings and histories, yet equal value. My dissertation will contribute to providing another significant piece of the global mosaic of abstract art by building upon existing studies, such as *Discrepant Abstraction*, which reveals the heterogeneous qualities of abstract art across a variety of locations that include Hong Kong, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Islamic world;<sup>27</sup> *Inverted Utopias*, which deals

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<sup>26</sup> Some authors like Xu Demin find the root of Chinese abstraction in ancient Chinese culture and argue that Chinese abstraction is earlier and thus superior to Western abstract art. Xu Demin, *Chinese Abstract Art Study*, 41-61.

<sup>27</sup> Kobena Mercer ed., *Discrepant Abstraction* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts; Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006).

with Latin American abstract art;<sup>28</sup> Ming Tiampo's study on Gutai, which addresses Japanese abstract art tendencies;<sup>29</sup> and Joan Kee's research on 1970s Korean monochrome paintings.<sup>30</sup>

Second, a less apparent commonality among previous scholarship is a tendency to alienate abstract art from its society. Xu Demin emphasized the purity of abstract art in his book, *Chinese Abstract Art Study*, defining abstract art as a pure visual form.<sup>31</sup> In their book, *Abstract Art: Another World*, Zhang Xiaoling and Meng Luxin defined Chinese abstract art as “another world (另一个世界),” which constructs its “own pure art (自己的纯艺术)” that maintains a distance from society.<sup>32</sup> They further argued that abstract artists tried to be free from political ideology in the last half of the 1980s, and abstract art was intact and separated from capitalism in the 1990s.

Taking an opposite view, I consider artworks as the products of a society that have a tight link with the sociopolitical circumstances of their creator. Connecting

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<sup>28</sup> Mari Carmen Ramírez, Héctor Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Houston, Texas: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Joan Kee, “Points, Lines, Encounters, Worlds: Tansaekhwa and the Formation of Contemporary Korean Art,” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Xu Demin, *Chinese Abstract Art Study*, 169.

<sup>32</sup> Zhang Xiaoling and Meng Luxin. *Abstract Art: Another World*, 3-5.

abstract art to the Chinese sociopolitical context interacts with previous studies on Chinese fine art, film, and literature and its relation to politics and society of the PRC. In Chinese modern art history, Julia F. Andrews' *Politics and Painters in the People's Republic China, 1949-1979* and Maria Galikowski's *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1984* shed the most light on the effects of Communist Party policies on artists and their work, as well as organizational structures and the ideological framework governing Chinese art during and right after Mao's regime. In his article "Art censorship in socialist China," Jerome Silbergeld also sophisticatedly illustrated the ever-changing limits of freedom allowed by the Communist Party during and after Mao's regime by taking Chen Zizhuang (陈子庄; 1913-1976) and Li Huasheng (李华生 b. 1944) as case studies.<sup>33</sup> With Silbergeld's work on Sichuan, my study on Shanghai will contribute to providing multiple pictures of the relationship between art and political regulation within China.

Beyond art history, historian Paul Pickowicz tightly interwove the emergence of the new cinemas in China and the loosened control of the CCP in early post-Mao China.<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, Chris Berry's *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*

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<sup>33</sup> Jerome Silbergeld, "Art Censorship in Socialist China: A Do-It-Yourself System," in *Suspended License*, ed. Elizabeth Childs (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 299-332.

<sup>34</sup> Paul G. Pickowicz, "Popular Cinema and Political Thought in Early Post-Mao China: Reflections on Official Pronouncements, Film, and the Film Audience," *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 251-270. (An earlier version of this article appeared as "Popular Cinema and Political Thought in Post-Mao China: Reflections on Official Pronouncements, Film, and

illustrates tensions between Communist Party censorship and artists' request for freedom in the field of cinema during 1976 and 1981 and regarded such tensions and changes as signals of the emergence of postsocialist society in China.<sup>35</sup> In his book, *The Uses of Literature*, Perry Link also examined sensible games between the Communist Party and cultural producers during the post-Mao period with a particular focus on literature.<sup>36</sup> Interlaced with these studies of cinema and literature, my study on abstract paintings in 1980s Shanghai will provide another sphere that explains the close link of cultural production and Chinese politics and society in the post-Mao period.

Third noticeable point is that many previous writings commonly considered abstract art before 1985 in China as barren efforts. To take a few examples, in the catalogue of *China's New Art: Post-1989 Exhibition*, Yi Ying described abstract art before 1985 by saying that "individual artists in China have continuously carried out experiments with abstract art, but precious few have been successful."<sup>37</sup> Among the three periods of Chinese abstract art categorized by Zhang Xiaoling and Meng

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the Film Audience," in *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People's Republic*, ed. Perry Link, Richard Maden, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), 37-53.)

<sup>35</sup> Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Yi Ying 易英, "Choice and Opportunity: The Fate of Western Contemporary Art in China," *China's New Art: Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), XLV.

Luxin—the preparation period of abstract art before 1985, abstract art in the modern art movement after 1985, and abstract art on the contemporary art stage of the 2000s—they called the early 1980s a “void path” (xujianqi 虚践期) when only discourses about abstract art existed and both the actual abstract art and abstract artists were missing.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in the catalogue of *Metaphysics*, Li Xu, a chief curator at the Shanghai Art Museum, also mentioned that at the beginning of the 1980s, there had been only discussions of abstract art.<sup>39</sup> Yin Shuangxi, associate editor-in-chief at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, wrote that abstract art entered the Chinese contemporary art scene as a revolutionary force following the 1980s contemplation by Chinese avant-garde art, but, due to time restrictions, those discussions were confined to an inferior level, dealing only with the definition and the legitimacy of abstract art.<sup>40</sup> This repeated description of the early 1980s as a void, barren, and inferior period is a critical error in attempts to systemize the development of Chinese abstract art.

I suggest that their claims, as all of them, failed to acknowledge fruitful productions of abstract art during the late 1970s and early 1980s in Shanghai. Neglecting the abundance, excellent quality, and meaning of pre-1985 works is

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<sup>38</sup> Zhang Xiaoling and Meng Luxin, *Abstract Art: Another World*, 56-61.

<sup>39</sup> Li Xu 李旭, “Abstraction, An Old Topic,” in *Metaphysics* [Xingershang: Shanghai chouxian yishuzhan 形而上：上海抽象艺术展] (Shanghai, 2001), no page.

<sup>40</sup> Yin Shuangxi 殷雙喜, “The Ascent of Chinese Abstract Art since the 1990s,” in *Beyond the Surface: Works of Chinese Abstract Art Exhibition* (Macao: Museu de Arte de Macau, 2008), 206.

apprehended to overemphasize the '85 Chinese Avant-garde movement or to regard abstract art as its precursor.

*Blooming in the Shadows* and *Turn to Abstract* are two prominent exhibitions among scarce cases that examined Chinese abstract artists' brave trials and meaningful results between 1976 and 1984. *Blooming in the Shadows*, an exhibition at the New York China Institute Gallery in 2011, probed unofficial art groups, including the Caocao society (草草社), the No Name Group (无名), and the Star group.<sup>41</sup> *Turn to Abstract* is an exhibition shown in Shanghai in 2010 with a focus on abstract art that traced several abstract art groups and their exhibitions in the late 1970s and 1980s Shanghai.<sup>42</sup> Aligned with their attempts to fill a gap in the existing scholarship, my dissertation, "Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai," will contribute by detailing the missing, yet critical part of Chinese modern art history: the period between the late Cultural Revolution and the birth of the Chinese avant-garde movement in 1985. The excellence and abundance of abstract art in pre-1985 Shanghai that I will analyze will provide not only an opportunity to correct the previous false understanding of post-Mao abstract art but also a chance to reconsider Chinese modern art history.

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<sup>41</sup> *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985* is an exhibition curated by Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi that was shown at the New York China Institute Gallery from September 15 to December 11, 2011. Although this exhibition did not focus exclusively on abstract art, a number of abstract works of the early post-Mao period was shown.

<sup>42</sup> *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985* [Zhuangxiang chouxiang: 1976-1985 Shanghai shiyan yishu huiguzhan 转向抽象: 1976-1985 上海实验回顾展] was presented at the Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art from May 28 to June 20, 2008.

The last noteworthy point is the lack of visual analysis in narrating Chinese modern art history. Although examining actual artworks is indispensable in studying art history, this is hardly done in studies of Chinese abstract art. Most exhibitions about Shanghai abstract art have only provided biographies of artists and a list of artworks without giving the full context behind them.<sup>43</sup> Even books exclusively dedicated to abstract art do not make sufficient effort to analyze each work. Zhao Chuan's *History of Shanghai Abstraction*, arguably the most contributory book among publications about Shanghai abstraction, lists exhibitions, influential curators and collectors, and representative artists, but it neither offers sufficient attention to individual artists nor provides careful visual analysis of their works. *Turn to Abstract* gathered materials related to Shanghai abstract art and conducted interviews with important Shanghai abstract artists, but extensive visual analysis on each artwork was also lacking.

Previous studies are worthwhile in that they collected and organized surviving materials and artworks of Shanghai abstract art, which are essential for its study. At the same time, however, accumulating facts is only a first step. Sufficient visual analysis of artworks should follow, based on those facts. Therefore, I will draw the full benefit from the previous studies and from my further archival research on Shanghai abstract art, on the one hand, and I will spend considerable time in analyzing each work of art, on the other.

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<sup>43</sup> One exception is *Turn to Abstract*. This exhibition includes important artists in the 1980s, interviews with each artist, and articles about discourses on 1980s Shanghai abstract art.

### *Methodology*

I will use a highly contextual methodology to fill the gaps found in the previous scholarship. Above all, I will purposefully make extensive use of formal analysis of each artist's paintings. I set the point of departure as artworks and will spend sufficient time to examine each of them in the aspects of forms, colors, texture, medium, style, and technique. My artwork-oriented study will provide a fresh way to look Chinese modern art, creating new value for each painting.

At the same time, I will aggressively bring sociopolitical factors into my analysis regarding the artworks as (re)productions of sociopolitical situations at a given time and a given place. Situating abstract paintings in the very context of 1980s Shanghai, this study will show that Shanghai abstract artists, with or without intention, engaged with politics and that seemingly indifferent abstract art could be considered overt speech on Shanghai society, politics, and culture.

In addition, I consider artists to be highly individual persons who react differently to the same external stimuli. This means that even in the same sociopolitical background of 1980s Shanghai, every artist made different works. Thus, I will look into the family, and educational backgrounds and personal experiences of each artist.

Thus, the three main features that I will look at are (1) the artworks, not the creations having universal or absolute meaning and message, but the (re)production of a specific society, (2) the sociopolitical and cultural background of Shanghai, especially the cultural heritage of modernity, which survived in the city, as well as the

role of the Communist Party, not homogenous but with many factions within it, and (3) the artists, namely Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Qiu Deshu, Yu Youhan, and Ding Yi, who are not idiosyncratic geniuses, but individual members of a society.

### *Chapter Description*

Chapter Two will examine the ideological meaning that was imbued into Chinese abstract art. I will first investigate how Mao's Party regarded abstract art, and then scrutinize how Deng Xiaoping's Party altered and/or succeeded that official stance toward abstract art in relation to the sociopolitical issues during the late 1970s and 1980s. Last, I will demonstrate that the Party's loosened censorship on abstract art reflects the requests for artistic freedom, and by extension, the democratic values, of the people. This chapter will reveal not only the way and the reason for abstract art to become an ideologically sensitive issue in the PRC but also the way that abstract art relates to its society.

Chapter Three will investigate the discourses on abstract art produced in the 1980s Chinese art world. I will analyze the collected articles about abstract art from major, nationwide art periodicals from the 1980s, focusing on how art theorists and artists thought about abstraction or abstract art, which is translated in Chinese in different ways, such as *chouxiang* (抽象), *chouxiang yishu* (抽象艺术), and *chouxiang zhuyi* (抽象主义). At the same time, the constant efforts of Chinese intellectuals to find their roots in Chinese culture will be illustrated. Articles about abstract art, written by 1980s Chinese artists and critics, will reveal incongruities

between the Western and Chinese concepts of abstraction, and thus, will complicate our understanding of abstract art.

Concentrating on the city of Shanghai, Chapter Four will demonstrate that the cultural heritage in the Republican period remained in Shanghai and provided fertile soil for 1980s Shanghai abstract art to blossom. Through this chapter, I seek to bridge the 1930s Shanghai modern art movement and 1980s Shanghai abstract art across Mao's regime, which blocked the official transmission of the modern art movement from the Republican to the Post-Mao era. For the discussion, I will search for the traces of abstract art in Republican Shanghai, find the routes for passing down the cultural heritage to the next generation, and investigate additional Shanghai sources that allowed abstraction to flourish in post-Mao Shanghai. This Shanghai-focused research will connect the Shanghai modern art movement of the past and the present and crystallize Shanghainese characteristics, contributing to identify regional variations within 1980s China.

Chapter Five will analyze 1980s Shanghai abstract artworks in detail. Five major Shanghai abstract artists, Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Qiu Deshu, Yu Youhan, and Ding Yi, are selectively taken as case studies. I will demonstrate that these representatives and pioneers of Shanghai abstract art created unique artwork by aggressively consulting Chinese history and culture, embracing contemporary Western art, and being influenced by their familiar and educational background and personal experiences during and after the Cultural Revolution. I will conduct careful visual analyses of their abstract paintings and scrutinize distinguishing points in relation to

the cultural, social, and political backdrop, as well as consider each artist's personal background. The works of these five artists may not show the entire abstract art of 1980s Shanghai, but they are still sufficient to reveal the distinctiveness of Shanghai abstraction. Although most paintings will be taken from the 1980s, the year 1976 has been chosen as the starting point. This is because of Mao Zedong's death on September 9, 1976 and the subsequent fall of the Gang of Four that opened the new epoch. My study ends in 1989, when the entire Chinese society faced another dramatic change, signaled by the tragic incident in Tiananmen Square.

## CHAPTER 2

### Abstract Art and Socialist Ideology

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s role in the arts was significant in the People's Republic of China (PRC), especially from its foundation in 1949 to the late 1980s, as it was very actively and directly engaged with art production and maintained a relatively severe control on the arts. The level of interruption was continually changing depending on the political situation, but in general, it was the CCP, or more specifically, its affiliated organization, the Propaganda Department (中共中央宣传部), that oversaw, regulated, and spearheaded the arts by deciding which styles and themes were ideologically right or wrong.<sup>44</sup>

Abstract art was also judged by the CCP according to socialist ideology, which was the fundamental foundation of the PRC, and according to the changing judgments, abstract art was alternatively prohibited and allowed. Thus, to understand Chinese abstract art, it is essential to examine how the official view of abstract art was changed and to analyze in what context those changes were made. In this chapter, I will study the CCP's official stances toward abstract art from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, examine its changes, and analyze the reasons for those changes in the sociopolitical context of the time.

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<sup>44</sup> The Propaganda (or Publicity) Department of the Communist Party of China is an internal division of the Chinese Communist Party that was in charge of ideology-related work, as well as its information dissemination system. It was founded in May 1924 and was suspended during the Cultural Revolution, until it was restored in October 1977.

*Abstract Art, an Ideological Error*

It is indispensable to examine how Mao Zedong defined abstract art, because his view was hugely influential in the following decades of Deng Xiaoping. Simply speaking, abstract art was totally banned in Mao's China. No abstract art was officially produced, and no abstract work was shown at national exhibitions.

It is not easy to find the Party's comments specifically on abstract art in the Maoist period, but in the fourth issue of the art magazine *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], which was published by the Chinese Artists' Association (CAA 中国美术家协会) under the Propaganda Department,<sup>45</sup> a short paragraph talked about nonfigurative paintings (无形绘画).<sup>46</sup> Placed in the section on "Western Bourgeois Art," this article started by introducing a nonfigurative painting exhibition held in Hamburg, West Germany. The author referenced comments from West Berlin's newspaper, from the introduction in the exhibition catalogue and from notes of participating artists. All of those comments championed a nonobjective painting, which was defined by the commentators as a painting that "had nothing" (一无所有). The article began with neutral, if not positive, nuance, but at the end, the author asked, "Doesn't a painting

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<sup>45</sup> The Chinese Artists' Association (CAA) is the national professional organization, initially organized at the First All-China Congress of Literary and Art Workers in 1949. The CAA was originally called the Chinese Art Workers' Association, but the group was renamed as the China Artists' Association in 1953. In 1954, the CAA published its first art journal: *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术]. During the 1950s, the CAA established additional branches outside of Beijing; however, it remained under the control of the Federation of Literary and Art Workers, which in turn, was directly supervised by the Communist Party's Propaganda Bureau.

<sup>46</sup> "Nonfigurative Painting" (Wuxing huihua 无形绘画), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no.4 (1961): 73.

that ‘has nothing’ mean an ‘absolute collapse’ (彻底完蛋)?” At the left bottom, a reproduction of Lucio Fontana’s Spatialism painting was inserted as an example of this “collapsed” work. The intention of the article was obviously to mock the concept of nonfigurative painting, in other words, abstract art, and, further, to deny it. To the author, and by extension, to the editors of *Fine Art*, abstract art was a form of Western bourgeois culture, China’s “enemy.” Considering the fact that *Fine Art* was sponsored by the CAA, which was controlled by the Propaganda Department of the CCP, it would not be unreasonable to regard the opinion about abstract art of the article as being aligned with the CCP’s official stance.<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting that, except for this short article, no single article about abstract art was found in this governmental art magazine until 1979. As *Fine Art* was the only nationwide art magazine at the time, the missing evidence from this magazine implies that abstract art had not been discussed in an open platform from the 1950s to the late 1970s in China. I surmise that the absolute silence on abstract art indicates it was supposed to be eradicated from China, being treated even as worthless to be discussed.

In fact, Mao’s guideline on the arts, encapsulated by his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” wiped out all possibilities for abstract art.<sup>48</sup> In May

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<sup>47</sup> *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术] was established in 1954 and resumed publication in 1976. It was the organ of the Chinese Artists Association, but it reached a wide range of the public—from cadre to the avant-garde artists and art lovers who played a major role in the art scene throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s.

<sup>48</sup> For a translation and discussion of the text, see Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao*

1942, Mao Zedong declared;

[Our purpose is] to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind. [...] All our literature and art are for the masses of the people, and in the first place for the workers, peasants and soldiers; they are created for the workers, peasants and soldiers and are for their use.<sup>49</sup>

Adopting Marxist aesthetic theory in regards to art being subordinate to politics and Stalinist doctrine that emphasized art's duty to serve the people, Mao announced that art was one component of the revolutionary machine, and it had to be effective in uniting and educating the Chinese people, as well as in attacking the enemy, which, from the cultural aspect, was Western bourgeois art. Because art was defined as a tool to spread the Party ideology to the Chinese people, artwork with a clear narrative was favored, while art that focused too much on its formal qualities was thought to be improper. At the same time, to successfully affect the people, an artwork needed to be easily understood by the masses. Consequently, only works with readable stories and recognizable figures were allowed by the CCP. On the other hand, if an artwork was undecipherable by the masses, it should be expelled from socialist China. All of these principles of art were unfavorable to abstract art, because it usually lacks clear figures and stories.

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*Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1980).

<sup>49</sup> Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, 70-84.

The Party members in the art field detailed its cultural policy based on Mao's talk in Yan'an. A number of art leaders announced their firm adherence to the realistic style and strong opposition to all forms of formalism. Jiang Feng (江丰 1910-1982), co-vice chairman of National Beijing Arts College and a member of the national committee of the All-China Federation of Literary and Arts Circles (中华全国文学艺术界联合会), supported realistic paintings that employed Western academic principles of perspective, anatomy, composition, chiaroscuro, and color. According to Julia Andrews, Jiang Feng further argued that it was necessary to cleanse the new forms of the "poisons of European modernism," considering it to be too formalistic.<sup>50</sup> "Poisons of European modernism," of course, included abstract art, even though Jiang Feng did not explicitly mention the word "abstract art." Another art authority, Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿 1895-1953), the chairman of the CAA and director of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, shared Jiang Feng's opinion. Xu Beihong's obituary in 1953, for example, emphasized his deep commitment to realism and his strong opposition to formalism.<sup>51</sup> To these realism-obsessed art leaders of the CCP, there should have been no doubt about criticizing abstract art, obviously one of the most deviant styles from realism and possibly the most representative form of formalism.

The CCP's denial of formalistic art (including abstract art) was presumably

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<sup>50</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> *People's Daily* [Renmin Ribao 人民日报] September 27, 1953. Recited in Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 125.

because Mao early on aggressively embraced the Soviet Union's art policy. Although it is questionable how directly Mao's Party adopted Stalin's doctrine of abstract art, considering that almost every sphere of society, including art, was constructed largely based on the Soviet model, it is reasonable to think that the CCP's rejection of abstract art was not their genuine invention but most likely an adaptation of Stalin's case.<sup>52</sup>

Actually, the elimination of abstract art from their society happened very similarly in Stalin's Russia and Mao's China. In the 1930s USSR, just like 1950s to 1970s China, the Bolsheviks harshly criticized abstract art, believing realism was the most ideal art form of the socialist state. Although it is controversial how voluntarily or violently the transformation from geometric abstraction to Soviet Socialist Realism occurred, Stalin's opposition to abstract art is a definite fact, simply by looking at his confiscation and locking of Malevich's paintings in the storage section of Soviet museums in the mid-1930s.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> When the five-year economic plan was implemented in 1953, Mao made the wholesale importation of Soviet models in art, industry, technology, education, and virtually all modern fields. In the art field, Soviet socialist realism, a highly idealized and artificial manner required by Stalin in the USSR, became dominant by the end of the five-year plan in 1958.

<sup>53</sup> Why geometric abstraction disappeared during the 1930s in Russia and how fast or gradually it happened still remains controversial. In his book, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Boris Groys asserted that Russian Avant-garde artists naturally and voluntarily gave up their radical art, because they could not achieve their goal to impact society with their art. Also, Groys argued that Russian Avant-garde and Socialist Realism are not total opposites. Socialist Realism embodies some core concepts of avant-garde, such as its belief in art that transforms the world and contributes to build a utopia. In a similar vein, Ekaterina Degot argued the continuation of the concept of art as means to impact society, from avant-garde to Socialist Realism, although "the overemphasizing of method, the relishing of color, the inflation of decorative quality, and inordinate emphasis of any element" disqualified a work as inappropriate to Socialist Realism ("The collectivization of Modernism," *Dream Factory*

Moreover, both the CCP's and the Bolsheviks' rejection of abstract art were engaged in an Anti-Formalism Campaign. In his book, *Formalism in Painting*, published in 1933, Osip Beskin (1892-1969), the head of the critics' section in the Moscow Section of the Union of Soviet Artists (MOOSSKh), laid out the theoretical basis for the Anti-Formalism Campaign, saying that "formalism in any area of art, in particular in painting, is now the chief form of bourgeois influence."<sup>54</sup> Also, at a meeting of MOOSSKh in April 1933, MOOSSKh chairman Volter Aleksei (1889-1974) defined formalism as "in essence the expression of a bourgeois ideology and worldview."<sup>55</sup> Formalism was to be seen as expressions of a bourgeois, thus anti-Socialist, consciousness. Such a negative view of formalism reminds us of Jiang Feng and Xu Beihong's strong criticisms of it. In Stalin's Russia and Mao's China, formalism was dispelled in the name of art for the masses' sake, and thus, abstract art, which was easily considered as too formalistic, was expelled from these socialist countries.

Surprisingly, there was a short time period during Mao's regime when the cultural weather became slightly milder in its tolerance of abstract art. It was in the

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*Communism*). Maia Toteva, however, criticized these scholars who overlooked Stalin's negation of Malevich's geometric abstraction. She emphasized that Stalin was particularly afraid of Malevich, for the reason that geometric abstraction opened too liberal a space for interpretation. Unpublished paper, delivered at the 101th College of Art Association Conference in New York, February, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art under Stalin* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991), 118.

<sup>55</sup> TsGALI (Central State Archive of Literature and Art) 2943/1/5. Cited in Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, 119.

early 1960s, around when Premier Zhou Enlai (周恩来 1898-1976) suggested diversifying the culture in June 1961.<sup>56</sup> Zhou's addresses, which were published about twenty years later, recorded his renunciation of the hard-line cultural policies. Zhou Enlai specifically criticized the Ministry of Culture, which mainly managed art academies at the time, for putting too much pressure on writers and artists, and he encouraged artists to develop a unique style and a variety of expressive means. In response to Zhou Enlai's speech, several informal student groups in Beijing were allowed to exist and study almost everything, including impressionism and abstract art, in the early 1960s.<sup>57</sup> However, this comparatively loosened control was very temporary, as Mao issued anti-rightist warnings in 1963 and 1964.<sup>58</sup> Then, in 1965, the Cultural Revolution, culturally the most controlling time of China, had begun, and the severe regulation on art was maintained until Mao's death in 1976.

Most of the time during Mao's hard-line socialist China, abstract art was considered to be a serious ideological error. This was because abstract art was thought to betray the fundamental function of the socialist arts—to deliver the Party ideology

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<sup>56</sup> Zhou Enlai, "At a Discussion of Cultural and Arts Work" (Zai wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui 在文艺工作座谈会). The Speech was originally carried in *Culture News* [Wenyibao 文艺报], No.2 (1979). A full translation is offered in *Daily Report*, (February 8, 1979), 2-20. Arnold Chang discussed this speech at length in his book *Painting in the People's Republic* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), 17-21.

<sup>57</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 220.

<sup>58</sup> Arnold Chang records that in Chairman Mao's two instructions concerning literature and art, one dated December 12, 1963 and the other dated June 27, 1964, Mao admonished the members of the mass organizations in literature and art for not carrying out Party policies and complained that many communists were promoting feudal and capitalist art, but not socialist art. Arnold Chang, *Painting in the People's Republic*, 21-22.

to the people—as it lacks clear stories. Abstract art also was believed to fail to serve the masses, which was another prerequisite for art of the PRC, because it was argued to be incomprehensible to most people. Considered to be a Western bourgeois formalistic art, abstract art was defined to be ideologically improper in a socialist nation, and, thus, justified such art being expelled from Mao's China.

### *Changing Stance toward Abstract Art*

Abstract paintings started to be publicly discussed, produced, and exhibited in the PRC starting in the late 1970s, which was a political transitional period from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping. The emergence of abstract art was owing to the cultural warming, the so-called Beijing Spring, which granted more freedom to artists and promised less political control over the arts.

The post-Mao cultural thaw was started by Mao's designated successor, Hua Guofeng. During his short regime from September 1976 to December 1978, the Cultural Revolution was finished by the death of Mao and the arrests of its leaders, and consequently, hitherto prohibited cultural products—plays, operas, paintings, and films—once again appeared. Also, journals dormant during the Cultural Revolution resumed publication, joined by new periodicals and magazines.<sup>59</sup>

The mild cultural notion was relayed to the next leader, Deng Xiaoping. In front of more than 3,200 politicians, writers, and artists, the new leadership officially

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<sup>59</sup> Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 428.

proclaimed less political control over the arts, as clearly shown in the speeches of Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Yang (周扬 1908-1989), Vice-Chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (中国文学艺术界联合会), at the Fourth Congress of the Federation of Literary and Art Workers (中国文学艺术工作者第四次代表大会) in the fall of 1979.<sup>60</sup> In his congratulatory message, Deng Xiaoping ordered an adjustment of the level of political interference in the arts. Blaming the violent and tight control during the Cultural Revolution, specifically that of Lin Biao (林彪 1907-1971) and the Gang of Four, Deng stated that “the issuing of executive orders in the areas of literary and artistic creation and criticism must be stopped.”<sup>61</sup> Deng further declared that writers and artists should be able to enjoy the freedom to choose their subject matter and method of presentation based upon individual artistic interests.<sup>62</sup>

Deng Xiaoping’s idea was repeated by Zhou Yang’s four-hour address to the Congress. Like Deng, Zhou criticized the Lin Biao and the Gang of Four type of

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<sup>60</sup> The Congress opened on October 30, 1979, in Beijing, and closed on November 16.

<sup>61</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “Congratulatory Message to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists,” [Deng Xiaoping tongzhi daibiao zhonggong zhongyang he guowuyuan zai zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe di sici daibiao dahui shangde zhuci 邓小平同志代表中共中央和国务院在中国文学艺术工作者第四次代表大会上的祝词] in *Chinese Literature for the 1980s: The Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists* ed. Howard Goldblatt (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1982), 13.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 13-14.

political regulations of the arts.<sup>63</sup> Although Zhou Yang's speech still left some room for political control, as he stated that the CCP needed to give guidance on the arts and the arts must be suitable for the political needs of the time, it was clear that Zhou withdrew the Party's overregulation on the arts.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, during the Congress, Deng Xiaoping officially allowed plural styles of art, opposing the artistic uniformity of the Maoist era. In his speech, Deng stated:

The unhampered development of different styles in creative works and free discussion of divergent viewpoints and schools of thought in literary and art theories should all be encouraged. [...] Writers and artists should prevent and overcome the tendency of monotonous formulism and jargonism.<sup>65</sup>

Deng's support for diverse styles of arts was again reiterated by Zhou Yang, who argued that a writer must be set free to write what he wants in any way he prefers and the Party should not demand uniformity.<sup>66</sup> Both Deng and Zhou's comments, at least at the meeting, endowed freedom to artists and encouraged various styles and subject matter. It was their approval of plural styles that let Shanghai artists circumspectly begin exploring abstract art in the late 1970s.

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<sup>63</sup> Zhou Yang 周扬, "Inherit the Past and Usher in the Future," in *Chinese Literature for the 1980s: The Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists* ed. Howard Goldblatt (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1982), 29.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "Congratulatory Message to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists," 10-11.

<sup>66</sup> Zhou Yang, "Inherit the Past and Usher in the Future," 30.

As shown, Deng Xiaoping's and Zhou Yang's talks obviously marked the new leadership's mild cultural notion. Art historian Maria Galikowski and historian Perry Link rightly analyzed why Deng's Party would have undertaken such a drastic change from the previous decades, in relation to Deng's heavy emphasis on economic development, more specifically, the Four Modernization Plan. That is, the purpose of Deng Xiaoping's soft cultural policy was to gain the cooperation of intellectuals to ensure the success of the Four Modernizations. Galikowski explained that the Party's criticism of the severe control during Mao's regime was an attempt to soothe the intellectuals who had suffered badly during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution and to encourage their participation in the new political program.<sup>67</sup> In the same vein, Perry Link analyzed that the warming trend at the beginning of Deng's reign was a gesture of conciliation toward mentally traumatized intellectuals, considering the fact that it came soon after Deng's announcement of the official launch of China's Four Modernizations at the Third Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in December 1978.<sup>68</sup> Their opinions become more convincing by virtue of the fact that Deng Xiaoping repeatedly asserted the arts must support the Four Modernization Plan during his speech at the Fourth Congress.

It is true that the new leadership's cultural notion became relatively liberal, but at the same time, they did not forget to set a boundary on artistic freedom not to

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<sup>67</sup> Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1984* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), 175.

<sup>68</sup> Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 18.

threaten the PRC's socialist identity. All speakers at the Fourth Congress called Chinese artworks "our socialist literature and art" and consistently reminded people that it was crucial to successfully apply the basics of Mao Zedong's guideline on the arts in order to firmly maintain China's socialist identity. Deng Xiaoping requested artists to adhere to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought and not forget that Chinese art must serve the masses. He declared;

Literary and art workers should exert themselves in the study of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. [...] The people are the mother of literary and art workers. All progressive literary and art workers owe their creative lives to their flesh-and-blood relationship with the people. Forgetting, neglecting, or severing this relationship would eventually dry up one's creative life.<sup>69</sup>

Zhou Yang's statement was more specific. Setting a relationship between the arts and people's lives as the most fundamental condition of art, Zhou Yang urged the Chinese, in other words, socialist writers and artists, to make an effort to understand and depict people's lives. He definitively declared that no work of art could be divorced from real life. That is, the promise of artistic freedom was conditional, as he stated: "a writer or artist, as long as he accepts the premise that literature and art must correctly mirror real life, is free to choose his own method of creation."<sup>70</sup>

The third expanded meeting of the Executive Council of the Chinese Artists' Association (美协常务理事扩大会议), held on November 3, 1979, proclaimed the

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<sup>69</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "Congratulatory Message to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists," 11.

<sup>70</sup> Zhou Yang, "Inherit the Past and Usher in the Future," 27-28.

CAA's firm adherence to the political leaders' cultural policy. A statement issued by the Association constituted a compromise between party control and artistic freedom: "The Chinese Artists' Association legally defends the artist's right to individual expression [...] as long as [the] artist does not subvert the goals of the Communist Party."<sup>71</sup> Echoing the talks at the Fourth Congress, the CAA concluded that the absolute control over the arts of Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four was wrong. At the same time, however, it clearly stated that art should keep socialism's direction, follow the CCP's guidance, and serve the Chinese people. It also required artists to consider the masses' lives as the origin of their creation.

In sum, the mild cultural policy of Deng Xiaoping's Party certainly had a limitation, in spite of allowing increased freedom. Political control on art was relatively loosened, but it was still the Party that decided whether an artwork was ideologically correct or not. Plural styles were permitted, only if a work was justified by serving socialist China. Due to such conditions, the CCP still had plenty authority and reason to regulate the production of the arts.

The very premise of the new cultural notion—that socialist art serves the masses—was never beneficial to abstract art, even if Deng Xiaoping or Zhou Yang did not specifically comment on it. Because abstract art does not contain figurative images, it is inherently difficult to think an abstract painting effectively reflects the people's life or successfully communicates with the masses. Moreover, there was no clear

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<sup>71</sup> John Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1987), 23.

criterion to determine if an artwork successfully achieved the official requirement on arts. Judgment on abstract painting was totally dependent on the Party's opinion, and there was no reason for the Party members to be favorable to abstract painting, which was completely banned as bourgeois culture by the PRC's founder, Mao Zedong. Therefore, abstract art was again given a politically unfavorable position in the new era.

The new leadership's negative attitude toward abstract art was officially proclaimed by CAA Chairman Jiang Feng's speech at a regular council meeting of the CAA on November 21, 1979 and was published in *Fine Art* in January 1980.<sup>72</sup> At the beginning of his speech, Jiang Feng admitted that endowing artists with more freedom was necessary. At the same time, however, he stressed that the aim of art was to serve the people, which was the very essence of socialist art. Thus, he argued, every artwork should qualify by this very fundamental prerequisite of socialist art. Only by doing so could China prevent petty bourgeois liberalization and anarchism. Just like Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Yang, Jiang Feng concluded that style, expression, and subject matter could be diverse, as long as the work reflects the masses' lives and can be understood by them.

Then, Jiang Feng expressed his antagonism toward abstract art by sharing one anecdote. He stated;

Some foreign friends asked me if Chinese art schools have been

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<sup>72</sup> Jiang Feng 江丰, "Art to Serve the Masses" (Yishu wei renmin dazong fuwu 艺术为人民大众服务), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no.1 (1980): 5-6.

teaching abstract paintings telling me that abstractionism (抽象派艺术) is currently developing in Euro-America, Japan, and Asia. I said no. They asked the reason. I answered it is because the masses cannot understand abstract art and they don't like to see it. This dialogue explains that the characteristics of socialist art and capitalist art are fundamentally different, and the difference comes from the different attitudes toward the people.

As this short paragraph reveals, Jiang Feng thought abstract art did not care about the people, therefore it was bourgeois art, ideologically different from socialist China. He also firmly believed that the Chinese people did not understand, and even did not like, abstract art. There was no way, in his opinion, to justify abstract art as an appropriate form of Chinese socialist art.

In fact, Jiang Feng has been remembered as one of the greatest supporters of new styles of art and young artists, though his last few years remain controversial. The fact that even such a liberal as Jiang Feng was strongly against abstract art during this time indicates that abstract art was commonly considered as Western bourgeois formalistic art during Deng's regime; thus, it was hardly possible to legitimize abstract art as one of the proper styles of art at the beginning of Deng's regime.

Jiang Feng's talk, given at the Teacher-Student Meeting of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art on 26 December, 1981, and published in *New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], expressed his antagonism toward abstract art even more strongly and in more detail.<sup>73</sup> A section that analyzed several issues of the art world is where Jiang Feng

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<sup>73</sup> Jiang Feng 江丰, "Several Problems of Art Education and Art Creation" (Meishu jiaoxuehe meishu chuanguo zhongde jige wenti 美术教学和美术创作中的几个问题), *New*

first mentioned abstract art at length. Reiterating his previous speech, Jiang argued that abstract art was never justifiable, as it failed to meet the prerequisites of socialist art, which were to be understood by the masses and benefit the people. He stated that the Chinese masses did not understand nonfigurative works, and people who had a healthy mind did not even want to look at them.

Again, Jiang Feng stated that it was right to say socialist art needed to be new and to vary its styles and expressions, but he set the limitation that the reformation and variation of art must be based on realism. Art that abandoned the people and their lives, he said, was worthless. Jiang again confirmed that abstract art was bourgeois art, as it failed to achieve the very basic conditions of socialist art. His interpretation of why some foreigners praised several Chinese abstract works was that those abstract artworks were bourgeois, not socialist.

Jiang Feng's talk was followed by his counter-argument against several supporting ideas for abstract art suggested by its advocates. Jiang first criticized those who found abstract qualities in ancient Chinese art. To consider ancient Chinese painted pottery as the ancestor of abstract art, said Jiang, was a complete misconception, the result of confusing the decorative and fine arts. Moreover, Jiang Feng opposed a prevailing thought originated by Wu Guanzhong (吴冠中 1919~2010) to emphasize form over content. According to Jiang Feng, Marxist philosophy and theory of realistic art had constantly asserted that it was content that determined form, and an artwork that only focused on form, leaving out the content, was Western

bourgeois contemporary art, not a socialist production.

Through his talk, the Party's negative attitude toward abstract art became carefully elaborated and officially proclaimed. Abstract art was still regarded as bourgeois, because it betrayed its purpose of serving the masses and, thus, should be eliminated from socialist China.

The time when Jiang Feng delivered this much more firm and specific opposition to abstract art coincided with the time when Deng Xiaoping's Party retightened its general cultural notion. A tightened control started in December 1979 when Deng ordered the closing of the Democracy Wall, where the Chinese posted radical and critical political content of unofficial writings printed outside of Party control. That was only three months after announcing the mild art policy at the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists. Then in January 1980, Deng detailed the sudden change of his cultural notion clearly in one speech, delivered and later circulated in printed form to Party branches throughout China. In that talk, he warned that many youth had become obsessed with "bourgeois liberalism" and did not make the distinction between socialist democracy and bourgeois democracy.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, in July 1981, Deng declared the necessity of the aggressive use of "the weapon of criticism" when he issued a document titled, "Concerning Problems on the

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<sup>74</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "On our Present Situation and Responsibilities," [Muqiande xingshihe renwu 目前的形势和任务], Pamphlet. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, February 1980, 23. Cited from Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature*, 22.

Ideological Front.”<sup>75</sup> In this article, he lamented that some persons were not on the right ideological track and were, indeed, promoting bourgeois liberalism. On no account should the Party give up serious criticism of erroneous trends, said Deng, although his Party was not going to launch Mao’s Anti-Rightist Campaign again. The examples of bourgeois liberalism that Deng chose were the movie “Sun and Man” and its script, “Unrequited Love.” He regarded the criticism of those works as the right thing to do, because they gave a bad impression of the Communist Party and the socialist system. Above all, Deng Xiaoping demanded that writers, artists and ideological and theoretical workers in the Communist Party observe the Party discipline and that the Party discipline them.

About two months later, the Party general secretary, Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦 1915-1989), confirmed the resumption of the Party’s interference in the arts.<sup>76</sup> During his speech at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Lu Xun, Hu Yaobang described the dangers of “bourgeois liberalism” when he issued a warning to those tainted by it and called for a revival of the Party’s interference with the arts.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “Concerning Problems on the Ideological Front,” [Guanyu sixiang zhanxian shangde wenti de tanhua 关于思想战线上的问题的谈话], (July 17, 1981), in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, translated by The Bureau for the Compilation and Translation of Works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press), 367-371.

<sup>76</sup> Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, “Speech at the Meeting to Commemorate the Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Lu Xun” (Zai Luxun tansheng yibai zhounian jinian dahuishangde jianghua 在鲁迅诞生一百周年纪念大会上的讲话), *Enlightenment Daily* [Guangming Ribao 光明日报], 26 September 1981, 1-2. Cited in Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature*, 30.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

The heightened political regulation caused consequences in the art world, and abstract art, about to emerge at the time, was one of the victims. The forceful shut down of a group show of the Caocao Society (草草社), a group of seven artists from Shanghai and four from Hangzhou, is a representative example of how the changed cultural notion affected abstract art.

Caocao Society's exhibition, *The Grass Society: Painting Exhibition for the Eighties* (草草社: 八十年代画展), opened at the Luwan District Cultural Palace on February 16, 1980, with the approval of the Luwan District Cultural Palace director Wu Zikuan (吴志宽), and the Party's secretary, Zhang Benlin (张本林). No paintings at the exhibition seem to have elements directly threatening to the Party, as there is no discrimination expressed toward the regime or criticism implied of political leaders. For example, the leader Qiu Deshu's exhibited works, such as "Rhythm of Stream" (溪的演奏 1979), "Ideal Landscape" (理想山水 1979), "Island in Fantasy" (幻想中的宝岛 1979), and "Under the Sunshine" (阳光下 1979), are just highly abstracted ink paintings often with traces of landscape. Other Caocao members also exhibited their own experiments with ink and paper, all of which show different levels of abstraction.

However, the exhibited paintings drew much negative attention from the affiliated art organizations of the CCP. Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi noted that the Shanghai Artists Association, for some reason, sent two staff members to examine the show, and they submitted an ominous report about the exhibition to the Shanghai

Municipal Party Committee's Propaganda Department.<sup>78</sup> After reviewing the report, the Shanghai Propaganda Department labeled the Caocao Society and its exhibition as a "typical example of bourgeois liberalism in the Luwan district cultural system."<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the exhibition was shut down quickly, and the Caocao group was dismantled. Indeed, as the organizer of the Caocao Society, Qiu Deshu was summoned to the director's office, informed of the unfavorable reaction of the Shanghai Artists Association and criticized for trying to be independent of the Communist Party. He was constantly watched, and his office was frequently subjected to searches referred to as "sanitation inspections." Qiu also lost his curatorial position at the Luwan District Cultural Palace.

It is not certain which particular factor disturbed the Propaganda Department, but considering that the Shanghai Artists Association reported the exhibition had "a tendency toward abstract art,"<sup>80</sup> it can be assumed that the main guilt of the Caocao Society was possibly the abstract quality inherent in the exhibited paintings. This premise becomes more convincing when we take into account the fact that abstract art was still a highly sensitive ideological issue during this time.

Another point worth mentioning is that Caocao's case reveals there were different opinions about abstract art within the Party membership. The director of the Luwan District Cultural Palace allowed the Caocao exhibition to be shown, while the

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<sup>78</sup> Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985*, (New York: China Institute Gallery, 2011), 102.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 102.

Shanghai Artists Association found the exhibition ideologically problematic. That is, opinions on abstract art were sometimes controversial among the Party members; it was just one style of art to some, while it was a serious ideological error, akin to political subversion, to others.

The Party's enhanced control over the arts was noticeably empowered, finally, at a meeting of the Party's Central Committee in October 1983, when the conservatives, namely Deng Liqun (邓力群 b. 1915) and Hu Qiaomu (胡乔木 1912-1992), claimed there was a need to eliminate what they termed "spiritual pollution" and launched the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (清除精神污染). It was a political campaign spearheaded by conservative factions within the CCP that lasted from October to December 1983.<sup>81</sup> Though it is a vague term, in general, its advocates wanted to curb Western-inspired liberal ideas among the Chinese populace.

Although art was not the prime target of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, it was by no means left unscathed. At a meeting in Suzhou at the end of 1983, the CAA clarified what kind of works would be the main targets of attack. The summary of this meeting was published in *Fine Art*: "In the past few years, there has appeared in our art a minority of works which are ideologically unhealthy and formally so strange that the masses cannot understand, so that to a certain extent they

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<sup>81</sup> The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign aimed to eliminate "obscene, barbarous or reactionary materials, vulgar taste in artistic performances, indulgence in individualism" that "run counter to the country's social system," according to Deng Liqun, the Party's Propaganda Chief at the time of the campaign. The campaign reached a climax in mid-November 1983 and largely faded into obscurity into 1984 after Deng Xiaoping's intervention. Pico Iyer, David Aikman, "China: Battling Spiritual Pollution," *Time Magazine* (November 28, 1983), 45.

have given rise to spiritual pollution.”<sup>82</sup> Their description of the characteristics of the “ideologically unhealthy” works—formally so strange that the masses cannot understand them—exactly coincided with Jiang Feng’s previously mentioned descriptions of abstract art. Given that, it is understandable that the representative bourgeois art, abstract art, was one of the foremost targets of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign.

Due to the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, the *‘83 Experimental Paintings Exhibition* (八三年阶段绘画实验展览), which showed many abstract paintings at Fudan University in Shanghai in September 1983, was forcefully shut down, and participating artists were harshly criticized by the Shanghai Municipal Communist Propaganda Department. At the exhibition, ten Shanghai artists displayed a total of forty-seven works,<sup>83</sup> and most of them were abstract works, as art historian Richard Vine stated that participants of the *‘83 Experimental Paintings Exhibition* “championed abstract composition at a time when representation was still de rigueur.”<sup>84</sup> Many visitors came to see the show even on the pre-opening day on

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<sup>82</sup> *Fine Art* editorial, “To Welcome the Sixth National Art Exhibition” (Yingjie diliuji e quanguo meizhan 迎接第六届全国美展), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 1 (1984): 2. “近几年在我们的美术上也出现了少数思想内容不健康、形式上又离奇古怪为广大群众所不理解的作品，在一定范围内起了精神污染的作用。”

<sup>83</sup> Participating artists were Li Shan (李山), Yu Xiaofu (俞晓夫), Zhang Jianjun (张健君), Wang Bangxiong (王邦雄), Leng Hong (冷宏), Zhou Jiahua (周加华), Gao Jin (高进), Cha Guojun (查国钧), Dai Hengyang (戴恒扬) and Fang Fang (方昉).

<sup>84</sup> Richard Vine, “Shanghai Accelerates,” *Art in America*, no. 93 (February, 2005): 110. Li Shan exhibited four paintings, mostly abstract paintings, and Zhang Jianjun exhibited five abstract works: “Eternal Dialogue” (永远的对话), “Time and Space” (时间与空间),

September 5, 1983. Visitors included many Fudan University students and some veteran modernist artists, such as Lin Fengmian (林风眠 1900-1991) and Liu Haisu (刘海粟 1896-1994). On the second day of the exhibition, a group of teachers and researchers from the Shanghai Theater Academy's Marxist-Leninist Teaching and Research Group visited the exhibition to examine it, presumably because many participating artists were students or teachers of the school. After reviewing the show, the group considered it to be problematic and submitted an ominous report to the Propaganda Department in Shanghai. On September 8, after two and a half days of the opening, artists were notified to close the exhibition by the Communist Youth League (中国共产主义青年团) of Fudan University, and the show was shut down in the afternoon.

Due to this exhibition, several participating artists were temporarily relieved of their jobs, and all had to write reports explaining their misguided thinking and to meet with the leader of their belonged organizations (*danwei* 单位).<sup>85</sup> One of the participating artists Zhang Jianjun, for example, was demoted from his position as a research assistant at the Shanghai Museum to that of doorman for eight months, then to carpenter.<sup>86</sup>

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“Work number 44” (作品44号), “Energy-originated from the inside” (热能—来自人类内部的信息), and “Collection & Expansion” (聚散).

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Li Shan by Maria Galikowski, in 1992, cited from her book, *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1984*, 235.

<sup>86</sup> Zhang Jianjun noted that the internal report confidentially divided participating

Criticism of this exhibition lasted until the end of the year. In December 1983, a conservative critic Huang Ke (黄可) published a negative article about abstract art in Shanghai government newspaper *Liberation Daily* [Jiefang Ribao 解放日报].<sup>87</sup> The reason for his criticism of abstract art was that abstraction fails to serve the people because it is incomprehensible to the masses. For his argument, Huang used abstract works shown at the '83 *Experimental Paintings Exhibition*, especially four of Zhang Jianjun's paintings as examples of indecipherable works.

The sudden revival of political censorship of art was perhaps because the Party thought the influence of Western bourgeois cultural products, for example, abstract art, was threatening the PRC's socialist identity. Or, Deng Xiaoping's Party might have thought that the level of artistic freedom granted at the beginning of the regime soared up to the intolerant level and, thus, needed to be readjusted.<sup>88</sup> Or, as

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artists into three groups based on the gravity of their "offenses." The first group was badly influenced by bourgeois culture, and only Zhang Jianjun was included into this group. The second group, including Li Shan and three other artists, was described as seriously badly influenced by bourgeois culture. The third group was leaning in the wrong direction, but if they get help, they would be fine. Zhang said that he could hear about the inside reports, because he was working at the Shanghai museum at that time. However, another participating artist, Li Shan, said he never heard about such classifications. Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, in Shanghai. Author interview with Li Shan, April 19, 2013, in Shanghai.

<sup>87</sup> The author pointed out that the audience could not understand the works, because they used strange languages of abstraction with rocks and glasses. Huang Ke 黄可, "Abstract painting, new form and national circumstance" [Chouxianhua, xiangxingshi he guoqing 抽象画, 新形式与国情], *Liberation Daily* [Jiefang Ribao 解放日报], 1983. 12. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Tony Saich argues that China's leaders had decided that conscious guidance in ideological and spiritual terms was once again needed by the middle of 1981, and that decision was shown at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1982, when Hu Yaobang placed the building of

Perry Link assumes, perhaps the new art trends, which once had served Deng's political interests of discrediting the policies of the late Maoist period in order to strengthen his own power, had gone too far in undermining the Communist Party's authority by the end of 1979.<sup>89</sup> In any case, it is clear that the Party's cultural notion was fluctuating from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Deng Xiaoping seemed to foster a mild cultural atmosphere at the beginning of his regime by granting more freedom to cultural workers, but soon after, he started to execute control over art and to regulate art production.

As illustrated, Deng Xiaoping's changing limits of artistic freedom certainly influenced abstract art. When the political interference with art was loosened in the late 1970s, abstract art started to appear on the Chinese art scene. Conversely, when the Party heightened the regulations in the early 1980s, abstract art was severely criticized, as shown through examples of the Caocao Society and '83 *Experimental Paintings Exhibition*.

#### *Tacit Agreement on Abstract Art*

The rigid cultural atmosphere caused by the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign reached its peak in early November 1983 and ended rather abruptly in

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spiritual civilization before democratization, thus making it a prerequisite for democratization. Tony Saich, "Modernization and Participation in the People's Republic of China, in *China: Modernization in the 1980s*, ed. Joseph Y. S. Cheng (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 44.

<sup>89</sup> Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature*, 33.

January 1984.<sup>90</sup> After the campaign faded away, the political control over the arts gradually loosened again, and the most liberal days of the 1980s were followed.

Remarkably, numerous new magazines were established as the private financing of publications—reflecting their independence from official institutions—was allowed in the mid-1980s.<sup>91</sup> The establishment and circulation of art journals helped artists to exchange new ideas and styles and to formulate new art groups. Many unofficial art groups in different parts of China, such as the Northern Art Group (北方艺术全体), Pool Society (池社), and Xiamen Dada (厦门达达), began to flourish after 1984.

Looking at the variety of styles, themes, and media of artworks made during the mid-1980s, the plural styles of art seemed to be officially legitimate by then in China.

During this warm period, abstract art firmly settled down as one of the art styles in the PRC. More artists started to delve into abstract art than before, and abstract works were shown in more open arenas, even at national art exhibitions and in

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<sup>90</sup> Why and how the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign ended remains vague. Deng Xiaoping might have intervened to end the campaign, but the general understanding is that this campaign slowly and naturally lost its momentum.

<sup>91</sup> The monthly (bimonthly from 1986) art magazine, *The Trend of Art Thought* [Meishu Sichao 美术思潮], inaugurated in 1984; the weekly paper *Fine Arts in China* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报] appeared in 1985, *Jiangsu pictorial* [Jiangsu Huakan 江苏画刊] resumed its publication in 1985; and *Painter* [Huajia 画家] was founded in November 1985. *Data* [Ziliao 资料] and *Compilation of Translations in Art* [Meishu Yicong 美术译丛] were especially important publications that mainly translated and discussed Western art theory. As Martina Koppel-Yang insightfully noted, these art magazines greatly influenced the art world at a national level by reviewing exhibitions and single works of art through their reports, shaping art world opinions and generating a general picture of the contemporary art movement. Martina Koppel-Yang, “A Nationwide Forum and Model: Art Magazines and Symposia (2003), in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Document*, ed. Wu Hung (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 45-46.

CAA's art magazine, *Fine Art*. Moreover, Zhou Changjiang (周长江)'s abstract painting, "Complement series No. 12," won the silver prize at the *Seventh National Fine Art Exhibition* in 1989.

One of the most obvious marks of the CCP's tacit approval of abstract art can be found in numerous pages of the newly born art magazines about abstract art. It would be too ambitious to list every article about abstraction in art periodicals in the mid- and late-1980s, as the list would require limitless pages, but viewing only the *Fine Arts in China* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报], which perhaps reproduced the most abstract works in color, mostly due to its frequent publication, sufficiently reveals that the Propaganda Department paused censoring publications about abstract art. The *Fine Arts in China* introduced a geometric abstract oil painting by Yin Suangxi (殷双喜) on October 26, 1985, Dai Hengyang (戴恒扬)'s "Work No. 27" (作品第二十七号) and Liang Quan (梁铨)'s "Memory of Countryside" (田园回忆) on November 10, 1986, and Wei Ming (未明)'s "Rupture" (断裂) on December 29, 1986. After 1987, the number of abstract paintings featured in this periodical increased, and styles, media and artists became considerably more diverse. The list includes an ink abstract painting by Zhu Mo (朱墨) on January 12, 1987; a rough abstract work by Cai Guoqing (蔡国强) on March 2, 1987; Wu Rongjie (吴荣杰)'s "Song of Countryside" (乡风谣) with brief explanations on May 11, 1987; an article about the abstract prints of Yunnan Province on August 17, 1987; abstract paintings by Lin Hanyuan (林汉源), Xu Hong (徐虹), and Lu Jingchun (卢京春) on November 30, 1987; two very

expressive oil abstract paintings by Wang Yin (王音) and Cao Li (曹力) on January 25, 1988; Chen Xing (陈行)'s two ink and color abstract works, which were featured with his article on September 5, 1988; and German Neo-expressionist Paul Kieffer's works were also introduced on May 1, 1989. Such abundant information about abstract art in a nationwide art journal is surely a significant change from the previous decades.

During this short period, not only individual artist's work but also exhibitions of abstract art were introduced without negative nuances on the pages of *Fine Arts in China*. A review on *Today's Art Exhibition* (今日艺术) in Shanghai contained several abstract works, including Meng Luding (孟禄丁) and Liu Anping (刘安平)'s multimedia abstraction in August, 1988. An article, "Abstraction's emotionalization" (感情化的抽象), reviewed Jiang Bibo (江碧波)'s exhibition with abstract paintings in September, 1988. Another article, "Today's Abstract Art" (今日抽象艺术), was published with abstract works by Zhang Jie (张捷), Gu Liming (顾黎明), and Yan Lei (颜磊) on March 6, 1989. In the same year, *Fine Arts in China* published a detailed introduction of Spanish abstract painter Antoni Tàpies and his exhibition at the China Art Museum that ran from April 19 to 30, and an article about Southwest Art Exhibition (西南艺术展) included Li Luming (李路明)'s Surrealistic abstraction.

Possibly the most conservative art journal CAA's *Fine Art* still published several articles that argued against the formalist tendency in 1986, but no further

criticism of abstract was apparent.<sup>92</sup> The magazine instead introduced abstract paintings of American Minimalist artists in its December issue of 1986.<sup>93</sup> One article even argued for the approval of abstract art in February 1987, although the author confessed he himself neither understood nor liked abstract artworks.<sup>94</sup>

*New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], which had been continually negative about abstract art in the early 1980s, also published a neutral introduction of European abstract art in its first issue of 1986.<sup>95</sup> Arguing for the value of abstract art, the author, Jin Ye (金冶), highlighted Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee as the main two artists of abstract paintings.

Indeed, Shanghai abstract artists, such as Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Ding Yi, Yu Youhan, and others, themselves published a journal in 1988, *Visual Art* (Shijue Yishu 视觉艺术), which contained their abstract paintings. This journal was just a one-time publication, but it shows that Shanghai abstract artists were consolidating their powers sufficiently to have an open platform to show their abstract works.

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<sup>92</sup> Zhu Xiaohe 朱小禾 and Ma Yixi 马怡西, “On the Independence of the Form of Painting” (Tan huihua xingshi de duli yiyi 谈绘画形式的独立意义), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], No. 1 (1986): 16-19, She Qun 舍群, “Content Determines Form” (Neirong jue ding xingshi 内容决定形式), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 7 (1986): 31-32, 41.

<sup>93</sup> Steven Henry Madoff, “Abstract Art Arrived” (Chouxiang Yishu Jiantu chonglai 抽象艺术卷土重来), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 12 (1986): 66-69.

<sup>94</sup> Yan Zemin 延泽民, “A Thought after Viewing Abstractionist Art” (Kan chouxiangpai yishu yougan 看抽象派艺术有感), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 2 (1987): 28.

<sup>95</sup> Jin Ye 金冶, “On the Concern of Abstraction in Art,” (Guangyu huihuazongde chouxiangzhuyi 关于绘画中的抽象主义), *New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], no.1 (1986): 26-33.

Moreover, abstract art started to be taught at schools in the mid-1980s. In Shanghai, Yu Youhan was able to teach abstract art at school under the course “Decorative Paintings (装饰绘画).” In his class, he let students transform the visible world into a relatively nonrepresentational form. Even if a student drew only three lines and called it art, Yu Youhan admitted it, as long as the harmony was good. Yu Youhan recalls that there was no severe censorship of the course.<sup>96</sup> The fact that Yu Youhan could semi-officially teach abstract art hints that the cultural restrictions of the time had been loosened noticeably, although not completely.

In this way, abstract art came to be publicly shown on the pages of art periodicals and at exhibitions and started to be taught at schools in the mid- and late 1980s. Even though the CCP did not officially approve abstract art, there were no more negative remarks about it, either. It seems that the Party no longer regulated abstract art or thought abstract works erroneous. Such tacit permission of abstract art is one of the hints that artistic freedom had noticeably increased at the time.

The mid- to late 1980s was actually when the Chinese people urged having more freedom in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. There had been many struggles by Chinese students, intellectuals, and workers to achieve more freedom to make political decisions, maximize economic benefits, and express one’s opinions and create artworks expressed by demonstrations, and these demonstrations

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Yu Youhan by Asia Art Archive, March 3, 2009, in Shanghai, as part of *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*. Asian Art Archive, [http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/yyhftfinal\\_201104281505414226.pdf](http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/yyhftfinal_201104281505414226.pdf) (accessed June 15, 2013).

caused continuous conflicts with the CCP.<sup>97</sup>

When the accumulated conflicts between Deng's Party, which wanted to keep the current social order, and the Chinese people, who dreamt of a more liberal society, finally erupted in the spring of 1989, resulting in the Tiananmen massacre on June 4, the Chinese art world suffered from temporal numbness and, thus, so did abstract art. Although the Party's regulation of art after this tragic event was not as serious as during Mao's regime, many artists still migrated to other countries, stopped producing works, and hid in their own studios in fear and hopelessness. Some pioneering abstract artists changed their styles, some moved to foreign countries, and others reserved their works from public showing. In the repressive atmosphere of late 1989 and early 1990, abstract art, a style that was claimed to have a bourgeois legacy, could not help temporarily suspending its flourishing.

To summarize, abstract art in the PRC drew much ideological attention and was heavily influenced by changing sociopolitical situations. Mao Zedong defined abstract art as corrupted bourgeois culture from the West and expelled it from his society, based on socialist art theory and Stalin's model. Although Deng Xiaoping

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<sup>97</sup> One of the most strident protests happened in December 1986, when college students demonstrated in more than a dozen Chinese cities, arguing for greater economic and political freedoms. According to Maurice Meisner's description, the 1986 student pro-democracy demonstration quickly spread from Hefei to some dozen cities in the Yangzi Valley and culminated in Shanghai, where 50,000 protesters filled People's Park in the city center in December 1986, followed by clashes with the police. This student demonstration began to attract the support of workers in Shanghai and elsewhere. They marched in the streets to demand the freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press, as well as democratic elections. The gathering momentum for democracy peaked at the Tiananmen Square in June 1989 and, unfortunately, turned into a terrible tragedy. Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 487.

announced that he would endow more artistic freedom, abstract art was still officially denounced during the early Deng period as ideologically wrong. The permission for abstract art seemed to be granted during the mid-1980s, but along with the chilly atmosphere of the entire Chinese society caused by the Tiananmen Square incident, experiments with abstract art had to temporarily slow down.

Since the PRC was founded on the belief in socialism, abstract art, which came from democratic societies, was regarded as an extremely sensitive ideological issue. The extent to which the PRC should permit abstract art was directly linked to the allowed level of artistic freedom and, to a further extent, democracy. Therefore, the early Deng, who prioritized economic development and made a slogan “socialist democracy,” loosened control over the arts and gave the possibility for abstract art to appear, but once the Party thought the level of freedom soared up to the level to threaten the stability of his regime, Deng Xiaoping decided to strengthen the Party’s control over the society, resulting in the temporal pause of a blooming abstract art period in 1989.

To the PRC, abstract art was an extremely sensitive ideological matter, rather than merely an artistic style, and it was alternatively allowed and prohibited according to the unseen political events and the subtle changes in ideological notions. That is, China’s ideological foundations and political system, which were different from Western Europe and North America, created a unique destiny for abstract art. And further, the tight link between Chinese politics and abstract art convinces us that abstract art actually mirrors the ideology and values of a society, as well as their

changes, even if abstract art visually looks very separate from the society.

## CHAPTER 3

### Discourses of Abstract Art in 1980s China

Owing to the relatively loosened cultural restrictions after Mao's death, numerous art periodicals newly emerged as an open platform for discussions, and Chinese artists and critics exchanged their ideas on various topics on the pages of those publications. Abstract art occupied the Chinese art circle as one of the most frequently and vigorously debated topics, especially between the late 1970s and mid-1980s.<sup>98</sup> Because abstract art was officially prohibited as corrupted culture during Mao's period, the main focus of discussions during the 1980s was whether or not to legitimize abstract art in Post-Mao China. Various art-related people suggested different meanings of abstract art and argued for or against it, mentioning abstract beauty and traditional Chinese art.

This chapter analyzes articles about abstract art, written by many different Chinese art theorists and artists from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, collected from various art periodicals, such as *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], *Fine Arts in China* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报], *New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], *Compilation of Translations in Art* [Meishu Yicong 美术译丛], *The Trend of Art Thought* [Meishu Sichao 美术思潮], *World Art* [Shijie Meishu 世界美术], *Artist* [Huajia 画家], *Art*

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<sup>98</sup> Martina Koppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989, a Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 68. Art historian Martina Koppel-Yang reported that one third of all articles published from 1979 to 1985 touch on the subject of the beauty of form, focusing on the beauty of the abstract.

*Center* [Meiyuan 美苑], *Literature & Art Studies* [Wenyi Yanjiu 文艺研究], *Chinese Theater* [Zhongguo Xiju 中国戏剧], and *Jiangsu Pictorial* [Jiangsu Huakan 江苏画刊]. These articles include those that have discussions about abstraction (抽象), abstract art (抽象艺术), abstractionism (抽象主义), and abstract beauty (抽象美). Since art journals were the main forum where the most fervent discussions occurred and were effectively circulated at a national level, scrutinizing articles about abstract art will offer a chance to understand the concepts of abstract art formulated within the 1980s Chinese art circle.

#### *Controversial Concepts of Abstraction (抽象) & Abstract Art (抽象艺术)*

The extensive controversy about abstract art was first ignited by a series of articles written by French-trained artist Wu Guanzhong (吴冠中 1919~2010): “On the Beauty of Form in Painting (绘画的形式美), “My Thoughts and Hope” (我的感想和希望), “On Abstract Beauty” (关于抽象美), and “Does Content Determine Form?” (内容决定形式?), were published in *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术] in May 1979, January 1980, October 1980, and March 1981, respectively.<sup>99</sup> Throughout these articles, Wu

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<sup>99</sup> Wu Guangzhong 吴冠中, “On the Beauty of Form in Painting” (Huihuade xingshimei 绘画的形式美), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 5 (1979): 33-35, 44.

Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中, “My Thoughts and Hope” (Wode ganxiang he xiwang 我的感想和希望), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 1 (1980): 8-9.

Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中, “On Abstract Beauty” (Guanyu chouxiangmei 关于抽象美), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 10 (1980): 37-39.

Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中, “Does Content Determine Form?” (Neirong jue ding xingshi? 内容决定形式?), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 3 (1981): 52-54.

Guanzhong consistently argued for abstract art to be legitimated in Post-Mao China. Among his articles, Wu Guanzhong most specifically talked about abstract art in “On Abstract Beauty.” At the beginning of this article, Wu gave his definition of abstraction. He wrote, “Abstraction (抽象) (abstrait or nonfiguratif in French) is nonfigurative. Although it is composed only with form, light, color, line, etc., it does not represent any specific object.”<sup>100</sup> This sentence implies that Wu Guanzhong considered abstract art as nonfigurative or nonobjective painting that has no suggestive figures; for example, paintings such as Malevich’s Suprematism or Mondrian’s Neoplasticism.

In the last part of the same article, however, Wu Guanzhong gave a fairly different concept of abstract art, in which it became a broader term that does not exclusively indicate paintings without referents. Wu described different levels of abstraction, such as “semi-abstraction” (半抽象) and “absolute abstraction” (全抽象).<sup>101</sup> Also, Wu stated that an artwork could not be separated from life, arguing that art had to refer to real life no matter how abstract the work finally becomes. This means that Wu regarded abstraction as an abstract artwork that modifies the nature, objects, and people into less recognizable figures but not absolutely disconnected from the real world. Indeed, Wu’s paintings are not pure combinations of lines and colors;

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<sup>100</sup> Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中, “On Abstract Beauty,” 37. “抽象(法文 abstrait 或 nonfigurative), 那是无形象的, 虽有形、光、色、线等形式组合, 却不表现其一具体的客观实物形象。”

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 39.

they somehow indicate houses, rivers, mountains, ponds, animals, and the sky. As his article and paintings show, as long as a painting does not realistically copy objects but somehow transforms them, Wu Guanzhong would probably have called it abstract art.

Wu Guanzhong's articles provoked many responses from professional artists, critics, and theorists. They continuously published their opinions about abstract art in different art periodicals over the next several years. Their definitions of abstraction or abstract art are different from one another, but they generally shared a relatively broad concept of abstract art, considering abstraction or abstract art as extracting essential things from objects, rather than entirely eliminating recognizable things.

In his article, "Brief Talk on Abstraction" (略谈抽象), Liu Gangji (刘纲纪 1933~) defined "to abstract" (抽象) as "to observe common forms, lines, and colors from different objects, to appreciate their beauty, and to express it in fine art."<sup>102</sup> It is true that Liu advocated a painting composed only with lines and colors, but he did not regard abstract art as the total absence of the real world.<sup>103</sup> Rather, his concept of abstract art contains possibilities for referents to be left on the canvas, just like Wu Guanzhong's. To illustrate, Liu Gangji stated that abstraction was not to describe (描绘) objects, but this did not mean that objects should be eliminated. Rather, he

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<sup>102</sup> Liu Gangji 刘纲纪, "A Brief Discussion on Abstraction" (Lüetan "chouxiang" 略谈"抽象"), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 11 (1980): 11. "把许多具体事物所共同具有的形象, 线条, 色彩和这些具体事物相对独立开来加以观察, 感受它们所具有的美, 并在绘画艺术中加以表现."

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

explicitly wrote that objects could be sensed (感知) from abstract art.<sup>104</sup> To him, whether a painting refers to the real world or not was not a disturbing issue, as long as it did not realistically describe certain objects. In Liu's concept, abstract art was a way to express the aesthetic beauty of various things by primarily focusing on forms, lines, and colors, rather than an obsessive pursuit of pictorial qualities. He further asserted that because humans are able to appreciate the beauty of form, line, and color being relatively independent from real objects, there is no reason to forbid abstraction.

In January 1983, Yang Aiqi (杨蔼琪 1942~) published his thoughts on abstraction, which were similar to Liu Gangji's. At the very beginning of his article, Yang Aiqi explained the meaning of abstraction by referencing *Cihai* (辞海), a comprehensive dictionary published in 1936. He explained abstraction as follows:

1. Opposite to "concreteness," extracts relatively independent aspects, elements, relationships, etc., from concrete objects.
2. A special type of thinking, which is to extract essential elements from objects and eliminate non-fundamental things.<sup>105</sup>

Then, Yang Aiqi defined abstraction (抽象) as a process of summarizing objects' forms from a realistic depiction to a relatively non-recognizable expression. Yang further argued that there were many levels of abstraction according to the abstracted

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 11. "说它是“抽象”的，是说它不和其一具体事物的描绘直接联，而不是说它不可感知。”

<sup>105</sup> Yang Aiqi 杨蔼琪, "About Abstraction in Painting" (Zatan huihua zhongde chouxiang 杂谈绘画中的抽象), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no.1 (1983): 19. "1. 词“具体”相对，指从具体事物中抽取出来的相对独立的各个方面、属性、关系等。2. 指思活动的一种特殊性，即在事物中抽取事物的本质属性，撇开非本质属性。”

level of figures—relative abstraction (较抽象), high level abstraction (高度抽象), and complete abstraction (完全抽象).<sup>106</sup> That is, Yang Aiqi’s concept of abstract art includes paintings that still contain some referents of the world.

In his article, “To Discuss Abstract Beauty Again,” published in *Fine Art* in 1983, Xu Shucheng (徐书城 1932~) basically followed Wu Guanzhong, Liu Gangji and Yang Aiqi’s concept of abstract art.<sup>107</sup> Xu noted that abstraction in art meant a unique art form (艺术形象) that does not describe concrete objects and did not limit abstract art to figureless paintings. As long as a work does not prioritize realistic representation of a figure, he argued, it could be regarded as abstract art.

In March 1982, Huang Lisheng (黄荔生 1959~) stated that “abstraction is a philosophical term. In philosophy, the definition of abstraction is, “Among numerous objects, to get rid of specific and non-essential characteristics, and to extract common and essential attributes. It is an indispensable method to form a concept.”<sup>108</sup> As he clearly explained in this sentence, Huang regarded abstraction as a thinking process to extract common and essential aspects from objects and applied this meaning to art.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>107</sup> Xu Shucheng 徐书城, “To Discuss Abstract Beauty Again” (Yetan chouxiangmei 也谈抽象美), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 1 (1983): 10-13.

<sup>108</sup> Huang Lisheng 黄荔生, “Some Thoughts on Effect of Abstraction in Art” (Dui ‘chouxiang’ zai meishu zhongde zuoyongde yixie renshi 对‘抽象’在美术中的作用的一些认识), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 3 (1982): 48. “抽象是个哲学名词.哲学中抽象的定义是这样的:从许多事物中,舍弃个别的、非本质的属性,抽出共同的、本质属性叫抽象.抽象是形成概念的必要手段.”

Thus, to Huang, abstract art did not exclusively mean nonobjective art.

In January 1983, Mao Shibo (毛士博 1928~2001) repeated Huang Lisheng's opinion, saying that abstraction was a process to extract common and essential characteristics from objects.<sup>109</sup> He further noted that purely formal elements, such as form, light, color, and lines, were the tools to express those abstracted things, not abstract art itself.<sup>110</sup> That is, Mao Shibo's definition of abstraction is not limited to a certain style or genre of art but is more like a method of thinking.

Shu Jihao (舒济浩)'s concept was similar to the above writers. In his 1984 article, "Abstraction · Abstract Art · Abstract Beauty" (抽象·艺术抽象·抽象美), Shu Jihao asserted that abstraction was the process of thinking to achieve essential qualities among diverse objects and that abstract art was the result of such a process to extract representative figural characteristics from objects.<sup>111</sup> Shu Jihao further argued that abstraction in art had the possibility for concreteness (具体可能性).<sup>112</sup> These statements indicate that Shu Jihao would have included relatively figurative works in his range of abstract art.

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<sup>109</sup> Mao Shibo 毛士博, "To Explore Abstract Elements in Our Traditional Art" (Woguo chuantong yishu zhong chouxiang yinsu chutan 我国传统艺术中抽象因素初探), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 1 (1983): 16.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 16. "形、光、色、线等纯形式因素只是表现具象或抽象的手段，而不是抽象本身。"

<sup>111</sup> Shu Jihao 舒济浩, "Abstraction · Abstract Art · Abstract Beauty" (Chouxiang · Yishuchouxiang · Chouxiangmei 抽象·艺术抽象·抽象美), *New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], no.1 (1984): 41-42.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 42.

All of these authors commonly stated that abstraction was not limited to paintings without recognizable objects. To them, abstraction meant the thinking process of extracting common and essential elements from concrete objects rather than an artwork comprising only lines and colors. Therefore, according to their concept of abstract art, referents of the real world could be left on the canvas, and different levels of abstraction were also possible.

Although it was rare, there were people who argued for a comparatively narrow definition of abstract art, for example, Jin Ye (金冶). Introducing English (nonobjective painting) and French (non-figuratif) words of abstraction, Jin Ye defined an abstract painting as a work that gave up describing an object (对象) or an expression of a concrete figure (形象) and eliminated representations of the surrounding world.<sup>113</sup> To clarify the concept, he referenced a foreign publication, *Abstraction-C(reation) non-figuratif* (非形象抽象创造), which he described as the first issue published by an abstractionism group in 1932. Jin Ye quoted: “Abstraction is to create non-figurative art. [...] So called non-figure (非形象) is to eliminate elements of explanation (说明性), illustration (插图性), narrative (文学性), and every element of naturalism [...]. Abstraction is to move gradually from natural forms toward the abstract, arriving to the non-figurative concept.”<sup>114</sup> He further stated that

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<sup>113</sup> Jin Ye 金冶, “On the Concern of Abstraction in Art” (Guanyu huihua zhongde chouxianzhuyi 关于绘画中的抽象主义), *New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], no.1 (1986): 26.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 26. “抽象—创造—非形象的艺术. [...] 所谓非形象, 就是排除说明

an abstract painting should aim at pure shapes (形态) and colors that were independent from the real world, and he introduced Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee as examples of abstract painters. Altogether, Jin Ye clarified his concept of abstract art, which was a nonfigurative art without any narrative, figurative, and explanative qualities but only with pure forms, such as color planes and lines. As I mentioned, however, in the 1980s Chinese art circle, there were fewer people with this type of strict concept of abstract art, compared to the former one with a broader range.

*Abstractionism* (抽象主义 or 抽象派)

Notably, many Chinese writers distinguished abstract art from abstractionism (抽象主义 or 抽象派). While abstraction mostly indicated the process of extracting essential characteristics, abstractionism usually meant an artwork that exclusively used pictorial elements, such as lines and colors. Several writers requested that abstractionism be allowed in the PRC, but the majority of Chinese writers disavowed the legitimacy of abstractionism, even if some of them advocated abstract art or abstraction.

Huang Lisheng, Mao Shibo, and Xu Shucheng belong to the minority circle who supported the value of abstractionism. Differentiating abstractionism from abstract art, which he defined as extracting common and essential attributes, Huang

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性、插图性、文学性以及自然主义的一切因素 [···]. 所谓抽象, 就是指我们当中有的作者从自然诸形态, 逐渐进入抽象, 达到非形象的观念及自然主义的一切因素, 开展纯粹的造形。”

Lisheng regarded abstractionism as art that pursues the beauty of abstract form itself (抽象的形式本体的美).<sup>115</sup> Huang further argued that abstractionism is definitely a legitimate term, since he believed abstract form, such as the combination only with lines and colors, could deliver the sense of beauty (美).

Mao Shibo also thought that abstractionism, which he described as the composition of formal elements without depicting any object, was absolutely allowable in socialist China. This was because Mao Shibo regarded abstractionism as one way to reflect people's lives, and he believed people could understand abstractionism works.<sup>116</sup> Mao Shibo further argued that the Chinese people should not be afraid of or deny Western abstractionism.

Xu Shucheng was another writer who advocated the legitimacy of abstractionism in China.<sup>117</sup> He presupposed that Chinese art should be socialist and, thus, should reflect the people's lives, but at the same time, he admitted that there could be multiple ways to achieve this goal. Although abstractionists' works only used pictorial elements, they could reflect the masses' lives as well as realistic works, and therefore, abstractionism needed to be legitimized in the PRC.

Meanwhile, Yang Aiqi, Shao Dazhen (邵大箴), the Literature and Art Theory Study Group at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art (浙江美术学文艺理论学习小组),

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<sup>115</sup> Huang Lisheng, "Some Thoughts on Effect of Abstraction in Art," 49.

<sup>116</sup> Mao Shibo, "To Explore Abstract Elements in Our Traditional Art," 16.

<sup>117</sup> Xu Shucheng, "To Discuss Abstract Beauty Again," 12.

Cheng Zhidi (程至的), Yang Chengyin (杨成寅), Liu Xilin (刘曦林), Shu Jihao, Hong Yiran (洪毅然), and Gu Hechong (顾鹤冲) shared a negative opinion of abstractionism and strongly denied its value.

Although Yang Aiqi had a favorable opinion on abstraction, which he defined as extracting essential elements and summarizing visible objects, he harshly criticized abstractionism.<sup>118</sup> Considering abstractionism as the maximized level of abstraction (among the three levels of abstraction: low, high, and absolute), Yang criticized that abstractionism was a narrow-minded belief that everything in the world could be expressed through abstract forms.

Shao Dazhen did not make a clear separation between abstract art and abstractionism, nor did he admit the legitimacy of abstractionism in socialist China.<sup>119</sup> Describing abstractionism as art started in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century that had been declining since the middle of the century, Shao Dazhen argued that abstractionism had a fundamental weakness: It failed to communicate with viewers, because it lacked recognizable objects. Consequently, to Shao, abstractionism had no value at all and, thus, no reason to be legitimized in the PRC.

The members of the Study Group at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art were also strongly opposed to abstractionism. They argued that abstractionism paintings basically betrayed the foundation of art, which was to reflect people's lives by using

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<sup>118</sup> Yang Aiqi, "About Abstraction in Painting," 20-21.

<sup>119</sup> Shao Dazhen 邵大箴, "Abstract and Figurative" (Chouxiang he juxiang 抽象和具像), *World Affairs* [Shijie Zhishi 世界知识], no. 15 (1980): 28.

concrete forms.<sup>120</sup> To them, abstractionism was merely an assembly of color chunks and several lines that only generated poor aesthetic feelings (美感).

Cheng Zhide also asserted that Western abstractionism was opposed to art itself, because Western modern abstract artists' catch phrase, art for art's sake, was just for pleasant sensation (快感), not for aesthetic feeling (美感).<sup>121</sup>

In the same vein, Yang Chengyin regarded the focal point of abstractionism as pursuing the form of abstract beauty separate from content and argued that this kind of art could not be realized in the Marx-Leninist society.<sup>122</sup> He understood that to practice abstractionism was to emphasize only form and to neglect content, which was derived from formalist aesthetics that were the opposite of socialist art. To Yang Chengyin, abstractionism that totally depends on meaningless lines and colors fails to satisfy the people's need and, thus, should not be legitimized in socialist China for the sake of the masses.

Liu Xilin also considered abstractionism as a work composed only with dots, lines, plans, and colors, leaving out concrete objects and readable contents, and he

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<sup>120</sup> Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art (浙江美术学文艺理论学习小组), "Formal Beauty and its Position in Fine Art" (Xingshimei jiqi zai meishu zhongde diwei 形式美及其在美术中的地位), *Fine Art [Meishu 美术]*, no.4 (1981): 43.

<sup>121</sup> Cheng Zhidi 程至的, "Discussion of Beauty and Form" (Tan mei yu xingshi 谈美与形式), *Fine Art [Meishu 美术]*, no. 5 (1981): 6.

<sup>122</sup> Yang Chengyin 杨成寅, "A Dilemma in the Aesthetics on Abstractionism" (chouxiangpai meixuede kunjing 抽象派美学的困境), *New Art [Xinmeishu 新美术]*, no. 4 (December 1982): 54-57.

harshly criticized it.<sup>123</sup> In his article, “Abstract Quality of Formal Beauty and ‘Abstract Beauty,’” Liu criticized abstractionism by using Mondrian’s abstract painting, “Composition,” as an example. He asserted that Mondrian’s work, a composition of vertical and horizontal lines and several primary colors, could be said to be a very good formal experiment, but it could not be considered beautiful, because it lacked realistic qualities; thus, such a thing cannot qualify as an artwork. Based on his belief that art should have a link to real life, Liu Xilin argued that art needed to deliver formal beauty through the harmony of abstract elements (lines, dots, colors), but it must contain concrete figures.

As previously mentioned, Shu Jihao had a favorable opinion about abstract art, which he defined as art that extracted representational figural characteristics from objects. However, in the same article, he harshly criticized abstractionism.<sup>124</sup> Like many other authors, Shu Jihao distinguished abstractionism from abstract art; to him, abstractionism is work that totally erases any referents, while abstract art can have some suggestive figures. From his very narrow concept of abstractionism, Shu Jihao criticized abstractionism with three attacking points: content, style, and value. Regarding content, Shu wrote that abstractionists’ paintings did not reflect the society, a betrayal of Mao’s definition of art to which China needed to adhere. Regarding style, the concept of abstractionism never makes sense, because artworks need objects

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<sup>123</sup> Liu Xilin 刘曦林, “Abstract Quality of Formal Beauty and ‘Abstract Beauty’” (Xingshimeide chouxingxing yu ‘chouxiangmei’ 形式美的抽象性与‘抽象美’), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 5 (1983): 9.

<sup>124</sup> Shu Jihao, “Abstraction · Abstract Art · Abstract Beauty,” 42.

anyway to reflect a person's inner world. Finally, abstractionists' paintings have no value, since they are indecipherable to the masses, thus failing to communicate with them. Based on these three aspects, Shu Jihao concluded that abstractionism was a serious evil.

In his article, "Regarding Abstractionism in Beauty and Art," Hong Yiran defined Western abstractionism as a call for nonobjectiveness (无对象性), total abandonment of description (描写), and an exclusive pursuit of self-expression (自己表现).<sup>125</sup> He then strongly denied the concept of abstractionism, arguing there was no such thing as pure form without objects and contents. If a painting only focuses on formal qualities, as Western abstractionism does, he stated, it disqualifies the prerequisite of art to reflect the people's lives. Therefore, to Hong Yiran, so-called abstractionism was never an allowable concept in socialist China.

Gu Hechong similarly argued that there were neither absolute abstraction nor abstractionist paintings, because there cannot be a pure form entirely separated from content.<sup>126</sup>

Likewise, abstractionism, often distinguished from abstraction or abstract art, was commonly defined as an artwork composed only with lines and colors and lacking

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<sup>125</sup> Hong Yiran, "Regarding Abstractionism in Beauty and Art" (Guanyu mei he yishu zhongde chouxiangzhuyi), *New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], no. 2 (1984): 62.

<sup>126</sup> Gu Hechong 顾鹤冲, "To Analyze Several Theories of 'Abstract Beauty'" (ping guanyu 'chouxiangmei' de yixie lilun 平关于 '抽象美' 的一些理论), *New Art* [Xinmeishu 新美术], no. 3 (1984): 76-78.

any figures and content. And the debate about abstractionism was mainly about whether or not to admit it in socialist China. Interestingly, neither advocates nor opponents of abstractionism denied that China was a socialist country and that art should satisfy socialist art theory, which states that art must reflect the people's lives. A few advocates of abstractionism believed that it could be one way to reflect the people's life; thus, they argued for its permission. However, the majority of writers were opposed to abstractionism, thinking that it fails to qualify for the fundamental condition of socialist art. Even though they admitted that formal qualities were important as much as content, to them, abstractionists' works were too formalistic; thus, they were never an appropriate form for socialist China.

*Abstract Beauty (抽象美) & Formal Beauty (形式美)*

Beauty (mei 美) is the first Chinese character that composes the Chinese word "art" (meishu 美术) and had been considered as the primary quality of art in China. Whether an artwork has beauty or not used to be the core criteria for judging its value. The discussions about the legitimacy of abstract art thus became naturally associated with the question of whether or not it has beauty, or to be more specific, abstract beauty (抽象美). Since Chinese art people thought that abstract art was largely dependent on formal qualities, abstract beauty was usually discussed in association with formal beauty (形式美).

Arguments about abstract beauty and/or formal beauty are highly complicated.

Some people regarded abstract beauty as the same as formal beauty, while others argued that they were two different concepts. Also, some people admitted the legitimacy of abstract beauty, while others totally denied it, although they regarded formal beauty as an important aspect in art.

Wu Guanzhong, Xu Shucheng, Du Jian (杜健 b. 1933), and Ma Qinzong (马钦忠) advocated for abstract beauty and, thus, for abstract art, although they did not perfectly agree on what was meant by abstract beauty.

Wu Guanzhong was the first to discuss abstract beauty and formal beauty. He did not explicitly explain what abstract beauty (抽象美) meant; he simply stated that it was the essence of formal beauty (形式美). On the other hand, he explained formal beauty in detail.<sup>127</sup> Defining formal beauty as the harmonious combinations of colors and forms, Wu gave some examples, such as beautiful color combinations found in nature and the diverse rhythms made by different figures and colors of houses in the Southern countryside. Based on this definition, Wu further argued that because people could sense beauty even when relying only on formal elements without mimetic representations, formal beauty was a totally logical concept.<sup>128</sup> Thus, abstract art that heavily depends on formal qualities is also definitely legitimate.

Xu Shucheng made a clearer distinction between abstract beauty and formal beauty. In his article, “To Discuss Abstract Beauty Again,” Xu wrote that the two

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<sup>127</sup> Wu Guanzhong, “On Abstract Beauty,” 38.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 37-38.

concepts are related but not the same.<sup>129</sup> He first divided art's form (艺术的形象形式) into three big categories. The first category is the figurative (具象), which describes concrete objects of the outer world (and does not contain the element of “abstract beauty”). The second is the abstract (抽象), which basically does not describe any concrete object. The third category is art that falls in between the two. Then, Xu explained where formal beauty and abstract beauty belong within these categories. Abstract beauty is only applicable to abstract forms and, thus, it belongs only to the second category, the abstract. On the other hand, formal beauty is a common element every artwork must have, thus it belongs to all three categories. Formal beauty, a wider term than abstract beauty, surpasses such categories as the figurative and the abstract. To simplify, what Xu Shucheng argued was that both abstract beauty and formal beauty were reasonable, yet different, concepts.

Unlike Xu Shucheng, Du Jian regarded abstract beauty as the same as formal beauty.<sup>130</sup> In his article, “Rhythm of Form and Form of Rhythm,” Du Jian requested that people reconsider previous scholars' opinions on formal beauty, arguing that formal beauty actually means the sense of rhythm. By rhythm, he meant the relationships of opposite elements, such as big and small, high and low, and the undulations between such contradictions. Equating formal beauty, abstract beauty, and

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<sup>129</sup> Xu Shucheng, “To Discuss Abstract Beauty Again,” 10-11.

<sup>130</sup> Du Jian 杜健, “Rhythm of Form and Form of Rhythm—Some Opinions Regarding Abstract Beauty” (Xingxiangde jielü yu jielü de xingxiang—guanyu chouxiangmei wentide yi xie yijian 形象的节律与节律的形象—关于抽象美问题的一些意见), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 10 (1983): 16-18.

rhythms, Du Jian asserted that everything in the world inherently had various types of contradictions and, thus, different rhythms, and that people naturally perceived beauty in those rhythms. Therefore, to Du Jian, formal beauty or abstract beauty or the sense of rhythm are surely reasonable concepts in art.

Abstract beauty was the root of Ma Qinzong's art, and he argued that fine art had originated from abstraction. In his article, "Short Analysis of Abstract Beauty," Ma did not clearly define what abstract beauty meant, but he talked about its effect. He wrote that abstraction was a process to extract basic elements from real objects and that certain feelings generated by those basic elements were the effect of abstract beauty.<sup>131</sup> For example, straight lines deliver a sense of parallels and spaciousness, curved lines express moving energy, a square expresses tidiness, and a triangle makes people feel unstable. Such stable or unstable and dynamic or calm feelings were, according to him, the result of abstract beauty. With the premise that art's objective was to instill feelings, Ma concluded that abstract beauty was a reasonable term, and so was abstract art.

The four writers illustrated above expressed incongruent concepts of abstract beauty. To Wu Guanzhong, abstract beauty was the essence of formal beauty, which was harmony of colors and forms. To Xu Shucheng, it was the beauty of pure abstract art. To Du Jian, it was rhythms created by the combination of contradictory elements, and to Ma Qinzong, abstract beauty was a generator of various feelings by using

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<sup>131</sup> Ma Qinzong 马钦忠, "Short Analysis of Abstract Beauty" (Chouxiangmei wenti taolun jianping 抽象美问题讨论简评), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 1 (1984): 53-57.

formal elements. Despite such diverse definitions, what binds these writers is the fact that they admitted the reasonability of abstract beauty; thus, they advocated the legitimacy of abstract art.

On the opposite side, some artists and theorists strongly denied the concept of abstract beauty, even though many of them admitted the concept of formal beauty. This group includes the Study Group at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, Cheng Zhidi, Hong Yiran, Liu Xilin, and Gu Hechong.

An article published by the Literature and Art Theory Study Group at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in *Fine Art* in April 1981 begins with a discussion of formal beauty, which they defined as beauty composed only of formal elements, such as light, color, lines, forms, and so forth.<sup>132</sup> The authors considered formal beauty very important, but at the same time, they clarified that formal beauty itself cannot be the goal of art. If art lacked content and forgot real life, they argued, art would be broken down. In other words, formal elements generate beauty (formal beauty), but formal beauty itself is insufficient to compliment an artwork. Art needs recognizable figures and meaningful contents. With such a negative stance toward pure formalism, the authors criticized the concept of abstract beauty, especially Wu Guanzhong's. They wrote;

We think that Mr. Wu Guanzhong's concept of abstract beauty cannot be justified in fine art. Reasons are below; first, what he says about abstract beauty—harmony with lines and colors without concrete objects—actually means formal beauty. Thus,

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<sup>132</sup> Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, "Formal Beauty and its Position in Fine Art," 41.

there is no reason to have the term, abstract beauty. Second, abstract beauty is anti-aesthetic. The concept of abstract beauty should indicate beauty of abstract things, but we cannot discuss beauty or ugliness of abstract things. [...] Abstract things cannot generate people's aesthetic feelings. [...] The essence of art is to reflect life by using concrete figures, and abstractionism paintings fundamentally betray this purpose. [...] A structure with several chunks of pigments and some lines with variations or unity only gives insignificant aesthetic feelings to people. [...] Our fine art should realistically reflect life and have aesthetic value, contents of socialism, and nationalistic sentiments. Art should be various, but issues on formal beauty and all the others cannot leave away from these fundamental prerequisites.<sup>133</sup>

As clearly stated in the above paragraph, the students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art strongly asserted that there was no such thing as abstract beauty, which was defined by Wu Guanzhong as the combination of lines and colors. The students declared that the aim of art was to depict the people's real lives, and this goal could not be achieved only with lines and colors. To them, formal beauty must be based on realism.<sup>134</sup> In their arguments, it is noticeable that the students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art separated formal beauty from abstract beauty. To summarize

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 42~43, 60. “我们认为吴冠中先生的“抽象美”的概念在美术是不能成立的。理由如下；第一，他所说的不与具体实物相联的线、色的组合的美，实质上是一般人所说的形式美，没有必要再给它一个“抽象美”的名称。第二，“抽象美”这个概念是反审美的。顾名思义，抽象美理应说的是抽象东西的美，可是，抽象的东西是谈不上美丑的。[...] 抽象的东西不会激发人们的审美感受。[...] 几块颜色，一些线条组织得再和混，再多样而又统一，也不过只能给人一点点微不足道的美感。[...] 艺术的本质是用具体的形象反映生活，而抽象派的画是根本违反这一点的。[...] 我们的美术应当是真实地反映生活的，应当是真有审美价值，应当是真有社会主义内容的，应当是富有民族特色的，应当是多种多样，讨论形式美的问题以及其他问题都不能离开这些大前提。”

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 42. “我们要的形式美是以现实主义为基础的形式美。”

their assertion, formal beauty is a logical concept that is achieved by harmonious colors and lines of recognizable figures in artworks, but abstract beauty is an illogical concept, because only lines and colors never qualify as an artwork.

Similar to the students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, Cheng Zhidi insisted that there was no such thing as abstract beauty that lacks content. Cheng Zhidi cynically criticized the concept of abstract beauty, saying that if an artwork that is composed only with colors and lines could be called art, an “x” mark on a piece of paper could be regarded as a masterpiece.<sup>135</sup>

Hong Yiran also rejected the concept of abstract beauty. As previously mentioned, Hong Yiran defined abstract art as a work composed only with pure formal elements, and he harshly criticized this concept, because he thought art could not be separated from content. In his opinion, formalistic art, which he equated with abstract art, fails to achieve fine art’s social effects (社会效果) and never satisfies its aesthetic function (审美功能); thus, it cannot be legitimately called “art.”<sup>136</sup> He wrote that abstract beauty or formal beauty, which Wu Guanzhong defined as the harmonious combination of formal elements, only comforted our ears and eyes and failed to evoke aesthetic feelings. And a work that only pleases one’s senses, failing to reach to the level of aesthetic, cannot be considered to have “beauty” in it; thus, it is not art. Based on the premise that art should have content, Hong Yiran argued that the concept of

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<sup>135</sup> Cheng Zhidi, “Discussion of Beauty and Form,” 6.

<sup>136</sup> Hong Yiran 洪毅然, “About the Content and Form in Art” (Tantan yishude neirong he xingshi 谈谈艺术的内容和形式), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 6 (1981): 4.

abstract beauty consisting only of formal elements is total nonsense.

Liu Xilin admitted formal beauty but denied abstract beauty. In his article, “Abstract Quality of Formal Beauty and ‘Abstract Beauty’,” Liu first agreed that formal beauty was logical and largely dependent on a harmonious combination of abstract elements (lines, colors, etc.).<sup>137</sup> However, in the same article, he argued that the concept of abstract beauty was illogical, regarding it as only formal elements without contents. Because art production is to symbolize messages and to appeal viewers with real, individual, and concrete forms, to him, abstract beauty, which is achieved by erasing concrete forms, contradicted the most fundamental characteristic of fine art. In his logic, if an artwork eliminates concrete objects, then it becomes the “evil of formalism.” Therefore, even if formal beauty that is created by the combination of formal and figurative qualities makes sense, abstract beauty that is composed only with formal elements is nonsensical.

In 1984, Gu Hechong also argued that there was no such thing as abstract beauty. Just like Hong Yiran and Liu Xilin, Gu stated that formal qualities could be relatively independent from content, but could not be absolutely disconnected from it.<sup>138</sup> Thus, abstract beauty is a totally illogical term. Arguing that what people usually called abstract beauty was actually formal beauty, Gu Hechong concluded there was no reason to use another term, “abstract beauty,” for one concept.

The students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, as well as Cheng Zhide,

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<sup>137</sup> Liu Xilin, “Abstract Quality of Formal Beauty and ‘Abstract Beauty’,” 9.

<sup>138</sup> Gu Hechong, “To Analyze Several Theories of ‘Abstract Beauty’,” 76-78.

Hong Yiran, Liu Xilin, and Gu Hechong, commonly considered abstract beauty too formalistic, and they refused to legitimize this concept in socialist China. Based on the belief that art should contain recognizable images and contents, they argued that even if formal beauty was a reasonable term, it must accompany figurative images. Solely formal qualities never satisfy the condition of fine art, thus there cannot be such thing as abstract beauty.

*Abstraction in Traditional Chinese Art*

It is interesting to note that many Chinese authors mentioned their local culture, such as literati painting, calligraphy, and Chinese characters, when they wrote about abstract art; they frequently used their culture as supporting ideas to advocate or reject abstract art. Notably, people who advocated abstract art usually tried to find abstract qualities in traditional Chinese art, while the opponents of abstract art did the opposite.

To request the legitimization of abstract art in Post-Mao China, Wu Guanzhong strongly argued that abstraction had been embedded in traditional Chinese culture. To support his idea, Wu used various examples, ranging from Chinese ink paintings to cave wall paintings this was most explicit in his article, “On Abstract Beauty.”<sup>139</sup> According to him, the way to draw orchids and bamboos in Chinese ink painting actually manifests the formal beauty of semi-abstraction. This is because the Chinese people prioritized the formal beauty of a work rather than its resemblance to

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<sup>139</sup> Wu Guanzhong, “On Abstract Beauty,” 38.

actual objects. Wu Guanzhong indeed described Qing dynasty painter Badashanren (八大山人) as a Chinese artist who most deeply studied the realm of abstract beauty, for the reason that Badashanren did not aim to realistically depict objects but wanted to express his inner uneasiness and sadness through the harmony of various black brushstrokes and white void space. Calligraphy also largely relies on the structural beauty of lines, frequently betrays its origin as a pictogram, and modifies the appearance of objects, and all of these characteristics are the fundamental characteristics of abstract art. The marbles of Yunnan Province, patterns on art crafts, and colored paintings on the stalactite walls of ancient caves in China are also taken as examples of abstract beauty. Through these examples, it is apparent that the arbitrary modifications of a painting's subject is the link connecting Wu Guanzhong's definition of abstract art and traditional Chinese art.

Like Wu Guanzhong, Qian Jinfan (钱今凡) advocated the legitimacy of abstraction by arguing that it was the foundation of traditional Chinese painting.<sup>140</sup> Based on the premise that the aim of Chinese painting was fundamentally different from Western painting—Chinese painting was to deliver one's thoughts and feelings (移情) through summarizing (概括) object's forms, while Western painting attempts to realistically copy the visible world—Qian asserted that there was no way to achieve

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<sup>140</sup> Qian Jinfan 钱今凡, "Delivering Feelings and Abstraction—Two Basic Principles of Chinese Painting" (Yiqing yu chouxiang—Zhongguohua liangjian jiben yuanli 移情与抽象--中国画两条基本原理), *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no. 11 (1981): 54.

this goal of Chinese painting without abstraction.<sup>141</sup>

In the same vein, Li Xianting (栗宪庭) emphasized the difference between Chinese and Western painting practices.<sup>142</sup> He contrasted traditional Chinese painting as being for self-expression, while Western painting was for realistic representation. Then he pointed out the abstract qualities of Chinese painting, specifically noting the fact that it does not pursue mimesis but aims to express one's feelings by modifying figures of nature.

Jiang Wenzhan (江文湛) found abstract qualities in Chinese ink painting, specifically in its expressive brushstrokes.<sup>143</sup> Jiang stated that although Chinese ink painting often depicted objects, it never aimed to realistically describe them; rather, it attempts to express one's feelings (抒情) through subjective, individualistic, and expressive brushworks. By equating this practice of subjective modifications of figures to abstract art, Jiang tried to convince readers that an abstract quality had been pervasive in traditional Chinese art; thus, abstract art should be allowed in the PRC.

Mao Shibo also asserted that abstract qualities were inherent in traditional

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 54. “没有抽象的造型手段，移情不可能有充分表现的形式。”

<sup>142</sup> Li Xianting 栗宪庭, “To Discuss Abstract Aesthetics in Chinese Classic Paintings” (Shilun Zhongguo gudian huihua de chouxiang shenmei yishi 试论中国古典绘画的抽象审美意识), *Fine Art [Meishu 美术]*, no. 5 (1983): 16.

<sup>143</sup> Jiang Wenzhan 江文湛, “A Brief Discussion on the Abstract Beauty of Ink Brush Stroke” (Qiantan bimude chouxiangmei 浅谈笔墨的抽象美), *Fine Art [Meishu 美术]*, no. 7 (1982): 8. “所以笔墨是主观的，是表现的，是有我的，而不是模仿的。”

Chinese art in his article, “To Explore Abstract Quality in Our Traditional Art.”<sup>144</sup> He took specific examples, such as colored pottery in the Neolithic period, the Bronze culture of the Western Zhou, a painting of the Eight Trigrams for Divination (八卦图), Chinese characters, calligraphy, and Chinese ink painting. To illustrate, Mao Shibo argued that decorations on the pottery of the Yangshao culture have abstract qualities, as shown in several decorative patterns that were gradually changed from descriptions of objects into more abstract and geometric forms. He also considered that patterns on the bronze vessels of the Western Zhou, such as thunder, dragons and wind, not only showed artists’ highly realistic drawing ability but also demonstrated their ability to summarize (概括) and abstract (抽象). Mao Shibo explained further that Chinese characters were originally pictograms, and thus figurative, but they are not realistic copies of concrete objects. Chinese characters are simplified forms of one type of object in order to express its most common and essential attributes. Abstract quality was, he argued, apparent in this simplification of appearance and extraction of the fundamentals.

Following Mao Shibo, Jing Xiaofeng (景晓峰) argued in March 1986 that Chinese characters had abstract qualities.<sup>145</sup> Jing explained that the grounding element

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<sup>144</sup> Mao Shibo, “To Explore Abstract Elements in Our Traditional Art,” 16.

<sup>145</sup> Jing Xiaofeng 景晓峰, “Short Analysis on the Rules of Ancient Chinese Characters’ Abstract Form and Creating Method” (Zhongguo guwenzi chouxiang xingshi guilü ji zaoxing shoufa qianxi 中国古文字抽象形式规律及造形手法浅析), *Art Center* [Meiyuan 美苑], (March 1986): 18-19.

of Chinese characters was to gradually transform objects' figures toward abstract lines and structure and argued that this was the very characteristic of abstract art. He further asserted that this abstract quality of Chinese characters had influenced later Chinese paintings.

In *Jiangsu Pictorial* in July 1985, Ding Xiyuan (丁羲元) repeated the above-mentioned writers' idea that abstraction had existed in Chinese culture, such as Chinese characters, theories of Chinese painting, Chinese theatre, and others.<sup>146</sup>

In contrast, some authors disagreed with the parallel between traditional Chinese art and abstraction. When Huang Zong (黄宗) criticized abstractionism in his article, "To Discuss Abstractionism Art" (谈抽象派艺术), he cited the irrelevance between traditional Chinese art and abstractionism as his supporting idea.<sup>147</sup> He pointed out that calligraphy was different from fine arts; thus, to use calligraphy as the example of abstraction was illogical. According to him, other examples used by the previous writers also failed to prove that traditional Chinese art had abstract qualities, because many of those examples do not belong to the realm of fine arts.

Huang Kunyuan (黄坤源)'s article, "Against the Reality and Departure of the Reality" (离现实和现实的背离), published in *Art Research* [美术研究] in 1981, also

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<sup>146</sup> Ding Xiyuan 丁羲元, "On the Discussion of Abstract Art" (Guanyu tan chouxian yishu 关于谈抽象艺术), *Jiangsu Pictorial* [Jiangsu Huakan 江苏画刊], no. 7 (1985): 37.

<sup>147</sup> Huang Zong 黄宗, "On Abstractionist Art" (Tan chouxianpai yishu 谈抽象派艺术), *Journal of Southwest China Normal University* [Xinan Shifan Daxue Xuebao 西南师范大学学报], no. 1 (1981): 109-113.

denies the equation of Chinese painting with abstract art itself.<sup>148</sup> Huang Kunyuan admitted that abstract characteristics, as opposed to illusionistic representations, naturally emerged in Chinese paintings in the process of delivering one's thoughts and feelings. At the same time, however, he clearly stated that Chinese practice and theory about abstraction were totally different from Western abstract art; thus, it was problematic to assert that traditional Chinese art had abstract qualities without distinguishing between the Chinese and the Western concepts of abstract art.

As illustrated above, some writers argued that abstract qualities had been inherent in traditional Chinese art, while others denied a direct relationship between the two. The former group of writers usually requested the approval of abstract art, while the latter argued not to permit abstraction in the PRC. It is not my primary concern to decide which side is more convincing. Rather, it is more important to point out that Chinese artists and theorists mentioned their local art when they wrote about abstract art and used it to advocate or criticize abstract art in Post-Mao China.

To conclude, discussions about abstract art were very fervent and complex in the 1980s Chinese art circle. Because abstract art was officially prohibited with the dishonorable title, "corrupted Western bourgeois culture," there was no officially agreed definition of abstract art in the early 1980s, but many art theorists and artists had a relatively wide definition of abstract art, that of extracting the essentials from the visible world, distinguishing it from a narrow definition of abstractionism. I surmise

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<sup>148</sup> Huang Kunyuan 黄坤源, "Against the Reality and Departure of the Reality" (Beili xianshi he xianshide beili 背离现实和现实的背离), *Art Research* [Meishu Yanjiu 美术研究], (April 1981): 55-56.

that this tendency was because the Chinese aggressively referenced their local art theory and practice, which prioritize delivering feelings more than illusionistic representation, in the process of constructing the concept of abstract art.

Moreover, due to China's recent history, the focus became whether or not the PRC of the new era should allow abstract art. As shown in the many articles analyzed in this chapter, almost every author adhered to the socialist art theory that art should reflect the people's lives. Some argued that abstract art was a possible means to achieve that goal, while others denied such a possibility. Some thought that abstract art had beauty and, thus, value, while the others totally refused to admit this idea. Some related abstract art to Chinese local art, while others disconnected the two. All of these diverse opinions and vigorous discussions about abstract art reveal that the Chinese art circle was slowly shaping its concept of abstract art.

## CHAPTER 4

### Abstract Art in Shanghai

As illustrated in Chapters Two and Three, abstract art was one of the most sensitive issues among politicians and one of the most frequently and fervently discussed topics in 1980s China within the art circle. Compared to other Chinese cities, however, the city of Shanghai was the center of the production of abstract works, with its outstanding population of artists who explored abstract art and a large number of exhibitions showing abstract works.

As early as the late 1970s, Shanghai artists Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Qiu Deshu, Chen Juyuan (陈巨源 b. 1939) and Jiang Depu (姜德溥 b. 1934) started aggressively experimenting with abstract art. Cha Guojun (查国钧 b. 1943), Chen Zhen (陈箴 1955~2000), Dai Hengyang (戴恒扬 b. 1946), Shen Zhen (沈枕 b. 1955), Yu Youhan, Yu Xiaofu (俞晓夫 b. 1950), Zhou Changjiang (周长江 b. 1950), and many others joined the exploration of abstract art in the early 1980s. A younger generation, arguably represented by Ding Yi, also began creating abstract art in the early 1980s.

Many of these artists graduated from either Shanghai Theater Academy (上海戏剧学院) or Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute (上海工艺美术学校), and they developed close relationships with each other. Although these artists rarely established a group, they often organized exhibitions together and displayed their abstract works,

resulting in a great number of abstract art exhibitions in Shanghai. To list some of them, members of the Caocao Society exhibited several abstract works in ink at the Luwan District Cultural Center in 1980. *'83 Experimental Paintings Exhibition* showed abstract works by Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun. *Modern Painting—Six Men Group Exhibition* (现代绘画—六人联展), organized by Yu Youhan and his students in March 1985, and *New Figurative Paintings Exhibition* (新具象画展), held in June 1985 at the Zheng'an District Cultural Center, included many abstract paintings. In January 1986, Zou Shilong (邹世龙 b. 1950), Yang Hui (杨晖 b. 1962), Gong Jianqing (龚建庆 b. 1959), and Wang Xiaojun (王小君) exhibited their abstract woodcut prints at the *Four Men Printing Exhibition* (四人版画展) at the Shanghai Xuhui District Cultural Center. In the same year, six artists, including Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun and Kong Boji (孔伯基 b. 1932), showed their abstract paintings at the *Painting Exhibition I* (画展 I) at the Shanghai Theater Academy art gallery.<sup>149</sup> Right after this exhibition, Chen Zhen showed his abstract work series, “Journey of Qi” (气游图), at his solo show. Abstract paintings were also shown in *The First Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition* (第一届中国油画展览) at the Shanghai Art Museum from December 21, 1987 to January 9, 1988. Also, a significant number of abstract works from Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou was gathered for *Art Today* (今日艺术展) at the Shanghai Art Museum from April 22 to 28, 1988.

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<sup>149</sup> Zhao Chuan 赵川, *History of Shanghai Abstraction* [Shanghai chouxian gushi 上海抽象故事] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2006), 37.

Such an outstanding number of artists and exhibitions of abstract works nurtured Shanghai as the hub of abstract art in China during the 1980s.

This chapter attempts to analyze what factors influenced the density of abstract art in 1980s Shanghai. For the discussion, I will scrutinize the unique history of modern art in Shanghai from the Republican period to the 1980s. I will first trace elements of abstraction during the Republican period, such as evidence that shows abstract art was introduced in Republican Shanghai and abstract works made by Shanghai artists. Then, I will explain how such legacies were passed down in the city during Mao's regime. In the last part, I will examine the new sources of abstract art in Shanghai in the Post-Mao era. As a whole, I will argue that Shanghai's modern art movement in the Republican period formed the foundation for abstraction to flourish, and the new cultural infrastructure of the city generated the blossoming of abstract art in 1980s Shanghai.

### *A Seed of Abstract Art in Republican Shanghai*

As the earliest opened and largest port of Republican China, Shanghai was transforming to a cosmopolitan city in the first decade of the twentieth century. Shanghai had an especially close relationship with European countries, which first knocked on the door of Qing China. Shanghai's foreign community included nationals of England, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Spain and Greece, to mention a few among many others, and the population of foreigners residing in Shanghai grew larger daily. Many European products, both practical and cultural, arrived in Shanghai almost

simultaneously with their emergence in Europe. Massive amounts of information about contemporary European art were brought into this international city. With a slight temporal gap, European modern art trends, such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, Fauvism, and Surrealism, were introduced through various magazines and artists studying abroad in Europe and Japan.

In contrast to the enthusiastic reception of Post-Impressionist, Expressionist, and Fauvist-art,<sup>150</sup> abstract art does not seem to be very popular among Republican

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<sup>150</sup> There are many articles and reproductions of European modern art in Shanghai magazines, especially about Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism. There are too many articles to list them all. *Eastern Miscellany* (Dongfang zazhi 東方雜誌), for instance, published many articles introducing European modernism: Futurism in the August 1914 issue; Western aesthetics in the April 1915 issue; neo-Impressionism, post-Impressionism, Futurism, and Cubism in Lü Qingzhong's article, "Concise Introduction to New Art Schools" (Xinhuapai lüeshuo 新画派略说) in the July 1917 issue; and Yu Jifan (1891-1968)'s series of articles about the various schools of modernist art in 1921. In that same year, Lü Cheng (1896-1989) also introduced modernist schools of paintings, including post-Impressionism, Cubism, neo-romanticism, symbolism, futurism, and German expressionism.

In *Art and Life* [Meishu Shenghuo 美術生活], Picasso's painting appears in issue No.4 in 1935, Edgar Degas' painting of Ballerinas in color were in issue No. 13 in 1935, and Edward Manet's paintings and following explanations were in issue No. 15 in 1935. Cézanne's *Mountain St. Victoire* was reprinted in color under the title "Landscape" [风景], and an introductory article about his art, and ten paintings was published in issue No. 23 in 1936. An article about Renoir and his paintings were published in the same issue. Paintings of Paul Gauguin appeared in issue No. 24 in 1936, of Renoir in issue No. 29 in 1936, of Vincent Van Gogh in issue No. 35 in 1937, as well as Henri Matisse with his eleven paintings and short article in issue No. 36 in 1937.

*L'Art* [Yishu 藝術] published reproductions of works by Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, George de Chirico, Paul Klee, Joan Miro, as well as short descriptions about contemporary European art trends by Liu Haisu, including Dadaism, Fauvism, Futurism, Orphism, and Cubism, and articles specially about Surrealism, dedicating its five pages to this article and four pages to Picasso in the first issue of 1933. Ni Yide (pen name Ni Te 尼特) introduced the origin, development, and major artists of Cubism in his nine-page article "Cubism and its Artists" [liti zhuyi ji qi zuojia 立体注意及其作家] and Liu Sixun (刘思训) wrote about Gauguin for eight pages and included Gauguin's self-portrait in its next issue. In *Art News* [Yishu Xunkan 藝術旬刊], an article about Van Gogh, written by Liu Haisu, was

Shanghai artists. Articles exclusively about abstract art or reproductions of abstract paintings have not been found in Republican Shanghai magazines, such as *Eastern Miscellany* (Dongfang zazhi 東方雜誌), *Young Companion* (Liangyou 良友), *Art and Life* (Meishu Shenghuo 美術生活), *Time* (Shidai 時代), *Art World* (Meishu Jie 美術界), *L'Art* (Yishu 藝術), *Art Magazine* (Meishu Zazhi 美術雜誌), *Art News* (Yishu Xunkan 藝術旬刊), and *Art Document* (Yishu Wenxian 藝術文獻), which were the main venues for introducing foreign art trends in Shanghai. Also, any remaining abstract works by Shanghai artists from the Republican period or remaining visual documents have not yet been found.

Despite the lack of surviving documents, there are many remarks suggesting that abstract art was known and produced in early twentieth century Shanghai. First, European abstract artists' names and abstract art movements were found in articles published in Republican art periodicals. For instance, explanations of Kandinsky's work were published in two articles in *Fine Art* (Meishu 美術) as early as in 1921.<sup>151</sup> Lü Cheng (呂澂) described Kandinsky's work as belonging to the third stage of art, which focused on expressions of one's spirit and, thus, erased realistic factors and only

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published in issue No. 1, 1932 on page 4-7. In issue No. 10 issue in 1932, Ni Yide explained Fauvism in detail on page 5-7.

<sup>151</sup> Lü Cheng 呂澂, "Reports of contemporary Western new painting movements" [Wanjin Xiyang xinhuihua yundong zhi jingguo 晚近西洋新繪畫運動之經過], *Fine Art 2* [Meishu 美術], no.4 (1921): 33-40.

Zawaki (泽木?) translated by Qin Chong 琴仲, "From Post-Impressionism to Cubism and Expressionism" [Cong houqi yinxiangpai dao lifangpai he biao xian pai 從後期印象派到立方派和表現派], *Fine Art 3* [Meishu 美術], no. 1 (1921): 65-70.

used shapes, colors, and compositions.<sup>152</sup> In the next issue of the magazine, Zawaki (泽木?) introduced Kandinsky as the founder of Expressionism and explained his theory. The author stated that Kandinsky's works lack any implication of physical objects but are just combinations of various colors of different chromas and brightness. However, the author emphasized that Kandinsky's work is not a random scribble. Just as music employs only notes and rhythms to express the composer's spirit, Kandinsky pursued higher and purer expressions through colors and compositions. Although these two authors did not use the word "abstract art," detailed explanations of Kandinsky's works sufficiently hint at his abstract paintings.<sup>153</sup> Citations of Kandinsky also appear in the October issue of *Cultural Construction* (Wenhua Jianshe 文化建设) in 1934, which was written by art historian and *guohua* painter Zheng Wuchang (or Zheng Chang 郑午昌 1894-1952). The author described Kandinsky's painting as art that only uses arrangement and composition (结构和调和) of color forms (色彩形状).<sup>154</sup> Zheng paralleled Kandinsky's art with music, as both of them achieve goals of self-expression without using objects in nature or logical illustrations. Also, in the article about Marc Chagall in *Art and Life* in 1935, the author mentioned French abstract

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<sup>152</sup> Lü Cheng divided art into three stages; (1) the practical, (2) the expressions of feelings, such as nineteenth-century naturalism paintings, and (3) the spiritual. Lü Cheng, "Reports of contemporary Western new painting movements," 37.

<sup>153</sup> Zawaki, "From Post-Impressionism to Cubism and Expressionism," 70.

<sup>154</sup> Zheng Wuchang 郑午昌, "Chinese Painting" [Zhongguo de huihua 中國的繪畫], *Cultural Construction* [Wenhua Jianshe 文化建设], no.1 (1934): 130.

artist Robert Delaunay, though without providing further explanation or showing his paintings.<sup>155</sup> In *Art News*, Ni Yide (倪貽德 1901-1970) mentioned Suprematism when he explained the development of twentieth century European modern art.<sup>156</sup> In the same magazine, Chen Zhifo (陈之佛 1896-1962) mentioned Kandinsky, yet without Kandinsky's paintings or explanations on his art.<sup>157</sup> In spite of no detailed descriptions of each, abstract artists' names appeared in 1930s art magazines, hinting that abstraction was known to the Shanghai art world at the time.

Second, some personal records confirm that early Shanghai artists knew about abstract art. When Lin Fengmian, the first Hangzhou Art Academy director, was visiting Berlin in the early 1920s, he was recorded as seeing the *Blue Rider Journal* (1912), which contained abstract works of Franz Marc and Kandinsky at house of Roda von Steiner, who later became his first wife.<sup>158</sup> In his biography, artist Guan Liang (关良 1900-1986) noted that he knew about Malevich's paintings when he was

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<sup>155</sup> Ju Yong 居永, "A New Formalist Artist Chagall" [Yige xinxingshipai de huajia Xiage'er 一个新形式派的画家夏格尔], *Art and Life* [Meishu Shenghuo 美术生活], no. 1 (1935): 12.

<sup>156</sup> Ni Yide (Ni Te 尼特), "Spirit of Contemporary Art" [Xiandai huihua de jingshen lun 现代绘画的精神论], *Art News* [Yishu Xunkan 艺术旬刊], no.1 (1932): 13.

<sup>157</sup> Chen Zhifo wrote "thoughts and expression by contemporary new artists, such as, Picasso, Marinetti, Kandinsky, are very difficult for common people to look at and feel them." Chen Zhifo 陈之佛, "Father of New Art" [Xinheng yishu zhi fu 新兴艺术之父], *Art News* [Yishu Xunkan 艺术旬刊], no. 12 (1932): 3.

<sup>158</sup> Zheng Zhong 郑重, *Lin Fengmian Biography* [Lin Fengmian Zhuan 林风眠传] (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanzhongxin, 1999), 24.

studying in Tokyo during the late 1910s.<sup>159</sup> Moreover, local peoples' memories of seeing abstract works by Shanghai artist Wu Dayu (吴大羽 1903-1988) have been passed down.<sup>160</sup>

Last, American abstract artist Mark Tobey's abstract works were possibly shown to Shanghai artists. Tobey made abstract drawings in ink during his trip to China and Japan in 1934 (possibly in Hong Kong and/or Shanghai). Considering that Tobey took regular calligraphy lessons from Shanghai painter Teng Baiye (滕白也 1900-1980) and was invited to meet with members of the Baihai society, there is high chance that they viewed Tobey's artworks.<sup>161</sup> This series of clues offers quite convincing evidence that abstract art was known to the Shanghai art world, at least to some selected artists.

It is unfortunate not be able to see the actual Republican abstract works, but fundamental elements of abstract art are still traceable through works of 1930s-era Shanghai modernist artists. This is because when realistic oil paintings were being canonized to be the ideal model of new Chinese art, some radical Shanghai artists took the opposite notion. They abandoned mimetic representation and experimented with

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<sup>159</sup> Guan Liang 关良, *Memoir of Guan Liang* [Guan Liang huiyilu 关良回忆录] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1984), 21.

<sup>160</sup> Zhao Chuan, *History of Shanghai Abstraction*, 12-13.

<sup>161</sup> David Clarke conducted a study about Teng Baiye and Mark Tobey. Clarke found that Teng Baiye studied sculpture in Seattle from 1924 to 1927, and there he met Mark Tobey. He assumed that Teng gave Tobey lessons in Chinese brushwork at some point in the 1920s. David Clarke, "Cross-cultural Dialogue and Artistic Innovation: Teng Baiye and Mark Tobey," in *Shanghai Modern 1919-1945*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, Zheng Shengtian (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 95.

formal elements.

Anti-representational characteristics are evident in the works of many leading artists of Republican Shanghai. Inspired by the Fauves' subjective modification of forms and colors, Lin Fengmian, one of the most influential artists of the Shanghai art world,<sup>162</sup> unshackled himself from the realistic representation; he used unnatural colors when he depicted objects (for example, leaves of a flower in yellow, orange, and violet, while stalks are in red with strong outlines) or eliminated any illusionary space and readable stories. Most of the time, the artist was concentrating on the play of colors and brushworks on the surface.

Another leader of the Shanghai art world was Liu Haisu, who founded the first school of fine arts in modern China, the Shanghai Academy of Chinese Painting (上海国画美术院), formerly the Shanghai School of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校). He also used unnatural colors and unrealistic forms. In "Female Nude" (女人体 illus. 1), for example, Liu put green on the model's arm, removed her fingers and toes, used a purple and black outline, and left pillows unpainted. The bed almost looks like a vermilion plane with vigorous brushwork, and the wall is in green with circling brush strokes. Inspired by European modern art that he saw in Japan and Europe, Liu Haisu focused more on how to make a better composition with colors and forms than how to realistically reproduce what he sees.

Guan Liang, a respected teacher and painter, also betrayed believable

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<sup>162</sup> Lin Fengmian studied at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Dijon and at its studio in Paris between 1920 and 1926. Lin had become extremely interested in the painting of Fauvism.

representation influenced by European modern art that he saw in Tokyo in the late 1910s.<sup>163</sup> His work “After a Bath” (浴后 illus. 2), for instance, lacks chiaroscuro and logical perspective. A nude woman who is brushing her hair, which is a similar topic in Edgar Degas, is painted without any subtle mutations of colors usually used to express the smooth flow of skin. Rather, Guan Liang seemed to see each of the model’s body parts as different colored planes; a part from the right arm to the hand is painted in bluish gray; the model’s face is painted in a tanned, earthy color with vermilion; and her left arm is in pale pinkish color. Guan Liang used relatively varied colors for her lower back and hips, but they are not smoothly connected, thus it is not three-dimensional at all. Behind her, a plant, a table with three small objects, and a curtain are indicated with simple color planes and a few lines, but it is hard to distinguish how the entire space is constructed. Overall, this painting hints that Guan Liang was more interested in playing with color planes than with making believable scenery.

One of the most powerful artist groups in this vein is possibly the Storm Society (Juelanshe 决澜社 1932-37). Writings and paintings by members of the Storm Society aggressively proclaimed their goal to remove themselves from the realistic representation of the visible world. The Storm Society Manifesto, written by its founder Ni Yide and published in *Art News* (Yishu Xunkan 藝術旬刊) in 1931, declared;

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<sup>163</sup> Guan Liang was trained by Fujishima Takeji and Nakamura Fusetsu at Kawabata Paintings Studio and Tokyo Pacific Art.

No longer can we remain content in such a compromised environment. No longer can we allow it to breathe feebly until it dies. Let us rise up! With our raging passion and iron intellect, we will create a world interwoven with color, line and form! We acknowledge that painting is by no means an imitation of nature, nor a rigid replication of the human body. [...] We believe that painting is by no means the slave of religion, nor a mere illustration of literature. We will freely, and cohesively, construct a world of pure shapes.<sup>164</sup>

Almost sounding like formalists, Storm Society members used this manifesto to state their opposition to depicting real objects in a realist style. At the same time, by emphasizing pictorial elements, such as color, line, and form, Ni declared the independence of art from its practical use. Ni Yide was also documented saying that he advised painters of the traditional Chinese style to abandon realism when he taught fine arts history at the Shanghai Art Academy.<sup>165</sup> Pang Xunqin (庞薰琹 1906-1985), another cofounder of the Storm Society, similarly noted that the photograph had already replaced the function of realist painting, and thus realism was not appropriate for contemporary China.<sup>166</sup> From these records, we can notice that the primary concern of the Storm Society was to emancipate art from the need to provide a descriptive replication of the real world and to put more value on its aesthetical

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<sup>164</sup> Ni Yide, “The Storm Society Manifesto” [juelanshe xuanyan 决澜社宣言], *Art News* [Yishu Xunkan 藝術旬刊], no. 5 (October 1932): 8. I excerpted a translation from *Shanghai Modern, 1919-1945*, eds. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, and Zheng Shengtian (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz), 234.

<sup>165</sup> Lü Peng 吕澎, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China* (Milano: Charta, 2010), 308.

<sup>166</sup> Pang Xunqin 庞薰琹, “Xunqin’s Essay” [Xunqin xuibǐ 薰琹随笔], *Art News* [Yishu Xunkan 藝術旬刊], no. 4 (1932): 10-11.

aspects.

Members of the Storm Society manifested their belief through their paintings, especially through arbitrary colors and forms. Pang Xunqin's "Composition" (构图 illus. 3) well reflects the Storm Society Manifesto and encapsulates their proximity to abstract art. First of all, "Composition" is completely anti-narrative. There is no logical story: ballerinas are dancing at the back, a robot and a woman are located at the front, and a machine-like figure is placed on the right. The title indicates nothing but does suggest that the work is about the composition of pictorial elements. Second, realistic depiction is missing. The entire space is flattened out, as the artist cast a single perspective on the canvas and did not use a believable chiaroscuro. By any measure, this painting embodies the antinarrative and antirealistic characteristics that became the critical points of 1980s Shanghai abstraction.

Another important modernist group, the Chinese Independent Art Association, took the same path as the Storm Society. This group was originally based in Guangdong but was also active in Shanghai. The term "independent" in the title referred to the group's rejection of mimesis, or, according to one artist's account, they embraced the freedom not to model art on real life.<sup>167</sup>

Whereas Storm Society members still chose subjects from the real world, some Chinese Independent Art Association members drew scenes based on

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<sup>167</sup> Zhu Boxion and Chen Ruilin, *Western-style Painting in China, 1898-1949* [Zhongguo xihua wushinian 1898-1949 中国西画五十年 1898-1949], (Beijing: Renmin meishu chunbanshe, 1989): 138. Cited in Shen Kuiyi, "The Lure of the West: Modern Chinese Oil Painting," in *A Century in Crisis*, ed. Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 129.

imagination. One example, Zhao Shou (赵兽 1916-2003)'s "Let's Jump" (illus. 4), shown at the Chinese Independent Art Association's second exhibition in Shanghai in 1935, is based on the artist's inner vision or dream. This painting neither tells a logical story nor exhibits a reasonable depiction of depth or an object. Although it still contains recognizable figures like fish, the purpose was not to make an illusionistic rendering of those objects but to express one's mental world through them. Furthermore, Zhao Shou's other paintings, such as "Faces" (脸孔 1934), have almost no referent to the real world.

Lin Fengmian, Liu Haisu, and Guan Liang, as well as members of the Storm Society and Chinese Independent Art Association, prioritized experiments with formal elements over delivering specific stories or representing the world outside the canvas. Such a tendency becomes the core elements of works of 1980s Shanghai abstract artists, namely the nonrealistic and nonnarrative characteristics opposed to the Communist propagandistic paintings. This is to say, the seeds of abstraction were already sprouting in Republican Shanghai, and critical points of Chinese abstraction were inherited by Shanghai modernist artists in the Republican period.

### *Passing Down the Cultural Heritage*

The Chinese sociopolitical situation from the mid-1930s was too harsh for young sprouts of abstraction to grow, since art without readable images was never officially supported in China from the Sino-Japanese War until the end of Mao's regime. Values started to be placed on realism when the Sino-Japanese war broke out

in 1937. During that war, art was expected to evoke nationalism with patriotic stories and to communicate with the masses through figurative images. Thus, the modern art style, seemingly overly focused on aesthetic matters, was thought to be inappropriate to China's critical situation. The rallying cry for national patriotism promoted the idea that, to borrow art historian Ralph Croizier's words, "the modernist exploration of style as a new language for communication of personal feelings" was considered to be "useless for China's real needs."<sup>168</sup>

At the same time, Shanghai lost its position as the locus of artistic experiments when many artists left the Shanghai art world due to the Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War. Liu Haisu departed for Indonesia in 1939 and stayed there until he was captured by the Japanese in Java in 1943. Wu Dayu took off on an aborted trip to Kunming. Lin Fengmian moved from Hangzhou to Jiangxi and then Hunan, returned for a short time to the French concession in Shanghai but went to Hong Kong and Vietnam before eventually reaching Chongqing via Hanoi and Kunming in 1939. Pang Xunqin fled to southwestern China and devoted himself to research on the folk art of the Miao people, and Ni Yide joined the Communist party and devoted his energies to political and social work, only rarely returning to his easel. In this desperately chaotic period, the artistic energy centered in Shanghai was scattered as those artists who had been depicting the unnatural world half willingly paused and flinched from their experiments with formal elements.

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<sup>168</sup> Ralph Croizier, "Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China," in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Australia: Wild Peony, 1993), 143.

The Communist victory in 1949 dealt another stunning blow to abstract art. The Communist belief in art that serves the people, plus academic realist Xu Beihong's political activities and friendship with Premier Zhou Enlai, as well as China's exclusive alliance with the Soviet Union that proclaimed its national style as Soviet Socialist Realism in the 1930s, firmly elevated realism as the national standard of the People's Republic of China. In 1949, Mao's Yan'an Talk confirmed that realistic figurative art with nationalistic and pro-Communist stories was the only style of his China. Therefore, not even mentioning abstract art without concrete figures and stories, paintings with too many distorted forms and with unnatural colors were criticized as an inappropriate style, and many of them were distorted.

Though the level of censorship changed from time to time, overall, art was regulated and standardized according to the ideal models of art that the Party had set, making Mao's China culturally the most rigid time in China. I argue, however, that Shanghai residents had opportunities to get to know different styles of art from the officially approved one. That was because the legacy of the modern art movement in the Republican era remained in the city with its practitioners.

Teacher-student relationships served as the main venue to pass down art styles that deviated from the official art. Several early Shanghai modernist artists were involved in art education both officially and privately from the 1950s and 1970s in Shanghai. Wu Dayu, for example, was hired by the Shanghai Art College in 1960 and taught there until the school's closure in 1965. Soviet socialist realism was maintained as an official curriculum (even though the relationship with the Soviet Union was

broken in 1960), but Wu Dayu presumably had a different teaching conviction. One of his former students, who was interviewed by Julia Andrews, described Wu Dayu's classes as incomprehensible and attributed the reason for this incomprehensibility to the students' narrow interest in Soviet art.<sup>169</sup> His comment tells us that Wu Dayu's teaching was different from Soviet Socialist Realism. The student further noted that Wu Dayu was prone to relate art to the philosophy of Zhuangzi and Laozi rather than to Chairman Mao's. There should have been many restrictions, but we can assume that Wu Dayu kept his previous art style at a certain level that was different from the official painting style of the time.

There seemed to be more art teachers who bravely taught prohibited styles to students. For example, Shanghai abstract artist Zhang Jianjun's art teacher at Qiujiang high school (虬江高中) in Hongkou district (虹口区) from 1967 to 1969, who was a painter himself, secretly showed Zhang Jianjun classical western paintings that the teacher collected during the Republican period. From the teacher's collections, Zhang Jianjun saw Renaissance masters' sculptures and naturalistic still life paintings. Because this kind of painting was often considered to be a Western bourgeois culture during that time, Zhang copied the reproductions secretly pulling the curtains shut. Sometimes, the room was so hot with the black curtains that he was sweating while drawing. With the art teacher, Zhang did plein air landscape, as well. He went out with oil and gouche to paint the streets of Shanghai. However, he had to pause painting

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<sup>169</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 224.

many times, because passers-by could be suspicious about his paintings and report him to the Party.

Private lessons were also very influential in Shanghai. When Lin Fengmian returned to Shanghai in 1951, he taught many students, such as Pan Jiliu (潘其鏊), Yuan Xiangwen (袁湘文), Xi Suhua (席素华), and Feng Jizhong (冯纪忠).<sup>170</sup> When we consider Lin Fengmian's remaining paintings of the time, he probably taught landscapes and female models in oil or ink. In the aspect of style, Lin inclined to the combination of his early experiments with European modern art and his practices with Chinese ink paintings. Although Lin's work was not abstract art, it should have taught his private students different notions from the Party-defined art.

Moreover, exhibitions offered opportunities for the people of Shanghai to encounter modernist artworks from the Republican period. Regarding the official exhibitions in Shanghai, Liu Haisu held his solo show at the Shanghai Exhibition Center in March 1957, where he showed 119 oil paintings, six paintings done in Paris, and 69 Chinese ink paintings.<sup>171</sup> Considering Liu Haisu's style at the time, exhibited paintings should have been landscape paintings with thick pigments with rough brush strokes hinting at reminiscences of Van Gogh or Claud Monet that he had practiced several decades ago.

In 1962, *Lin Fengmian Retrospective* (林风眠画展) was held at the Shanghai

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<sup>170</sup> Zheng Zhong, *Lin Fengmian Biography*, 160.

<sup>171</sup> Xie Haiyan 谢海燕 ed. *Liu Haisu* [刘海粟] (Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 2002), 129.

Art Museum. In this exhibition, 70 paintings of his Beijing opera figures and landscapes in ink were displayed. They are considerably different from the standardized work of the time, in the sense that forms are highly simplified, colors are somewhat arbitrary, and contents are not pro-Communist. During the exhibition period, Lin Fengmian discussed his art experience and the process of formulating his style at a seminar.

Personal lineage was another important conduit for passing down the legacies of abstraction in Shanghai. It is said that Wu Dayu hung about twenty of his own abstract works on the wall of his house in Shanghai between 1949 and 1969 so that visitors could view them.<sup>172</sup> Also, it seems that the works of Lin Fengmian, Guan Liang, and Wu Dayu were attainable in Mao's Shanghai. Artist Li Shan remembers that he saw Liu Haisu's paintings when he arrived in Shanghai in 1964 and that he could see other early modernists' works in the 1960s and early 1970s on some occasions, such as the exhibitions for National Foundation Day or New Years Day. These experiences led him to believe that Shanghai was very different from other regions, where only Soviet art was available.<sup>173</sup>

Another special thing about Shanghai is the remaining books and catalogues from the Republican period. Yu Youhan stated that he saw catalogues of Impressionism at the house of a neighbor, Fan Jiman (范纪曼 1906-1990), who was a friend of Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu in the 1950s, a teacher at the Shanghai Theater

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<sup>172</sup> Zhao Chuan, *History of Shanghai Abstraction*, 13.

<sup>173</sup> Author interview with Li Shan, April 19, 2013, in Shanghai.

Academy, and himself a painter in a highly expressive and abstract-like style.<sup>174</sup>

The library at the Shanghai Theater Academy was an especially important storage area for its teachers and students to find information that was inaccessible in other areas. That library held Western modern art books that were brought from Europe by artists studying abroad in the early twentieth century. Those books were unofficially available to selected students, as librarian Min Xiwen (闵希文 b. 1918) secretly lent the books to Theater Academy students even during Mao's regime.<sup>175</sup> Shanghai Theater Academy graduate Zhou Changjiang said that Min Xiwen locked the reading room and showed prohibited books and catalogues to students.<sup>176</sup> For Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun, it was at the Shanghai Theater Academy library where they absorbed various cultural sources, which became the foundations of their abstract art. Li Shan recalls that he was fascinated by those Western modern artworks, because he thought the official curriculum of the school and the Party-defined arts were too standardized.<sup>177</sup> Zhang Jianjun specifically remembers the reproductions of European modern art, such as the so-called "Twenty five books," a series of catalogues that included Matisse, Picasso, Renoir, Monet, and Kandinsky published by a Japanese

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<sup>174</sup> Interview with Yu Youhan by the Asia Art Archive, March 3, 2009, in Shanghai, as part of *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*.

<sup>175</sup> Min Xiwen was once a teacher at the Shanghai Theater Academy, but was demoted to a school librarian position in 1957, as he was accused of being a rightist. He was a student of Guan Liang and a classmate of Wu Guanzhong.

<sup>176</sup> Zhou Changjiang 周长江, *Zhou Changjiang* [周长江] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2003), 6.

<sup>177</sup> Author interview with Li Shan, April 19, 2013, in Shanghai.

publishing company.<sup>178</sup>

Another transmitter was, ironically, the Chinese Artist Association art journal *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术]. It was rare, but introductory articles and reproductions of works were one of the main sources that let Chinese people know about non-Communist art. The fifth issue of *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术] in 1961, for example, published an article written by Mi Gu (米谷 b. 1919) about Lin Fengmian with reproductions of Lin's ink paintings. Introducing Lin Fengmian as one of China's famous artists, this article was accompanied by Lin Fengmian's works of opera figures, owl, rooster, and one of birds in the river.

*Fine Art* again presented a painting of birds on a tree and a still life by Lin Fengmian in 1963. Depicting a pear blossom and little birds (梨花小鸟), Lin used highly simplified brushworks. The tree trunk is painted in one color, making it totally flat. This painting certainly has observable figures, but it is definitely not a realistic-style painting that depends on accurate drawing; neither does it deliver political messages. In the other featured painting, "Flower" (花), brush strokes and composition do not seem to be regularized. The far-left object is hard to recognize as a glass with a straw. Viewers cannot distinguish what is inside a basket located in the middle. With a few strokes, Lin left some indications of the three objects, but a detailed description is missing. The pattern of a table cloth looks almost like scribbles. It is hard to separate the wall and table cloth. The flowers are also mingled with the background. Overall,

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<sup>178</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, in Shanghai.

the painting shows the continuation of Lin's earlier formal experiments with colors and forms, distancing itself from the mainstream art of 1960s China.

The reason these non-Communist works could be published in the Party-regulated journal *Fine Art* is mostly because cultural control was temporarily loosened in the early 1960s. The failure of the Great Leap Forward kept the Party busy resolving the economic disaster and public unrest, and Zhou Enlai's unpublished speech about the democratization of art in 1961 helped create a relatively tolerant environment for individual and regional styles.<sup>179</sup> Although this loosened restriction was again tightened with the commencement of the Cultural Revolution and modernist artists' exhibitions and journal publications were fewer, they certainly helped non-Communist works to survive throughout Mao's era.

When the Cultural Revolution began, non-Communist artworks were strictly restricted, and exhibitions, even private production and publication were so severely censored that artists destroyed many of their previous works by themselves during this time.<sup>180</sup> In this intense cultural atmosphere, however, there were still chances to witness the legacy of 1930s modern art in Shanghai. Julia Andrews recorded that the

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<sup>179</sup> On June 19, 1961, Zhou Enlai delivered a talk concerning literature and the arts that remained unpublished until after his death. It called for the democratization of art. He specifically urged intellectuals to speak their minds, claiming that the party had been advocating the liberation of thought for three years with little result. Additionally, he criticized people who restricted themselves to the framework of Mao's Yan'an Talks. Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 206.

<sup>180</sup> Lin Fengmian scrubbed over a decade of his paintings to a pulp on a washboard. Liu Haisu was persecuted by the Red Guards and many of his paintings were also destroyed. Pang Xunqin destroyed many of his own works at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

militants forced Lin Fengmian, whose painting technique was considered unusual, to paint in front of a public audience to humiliate him.<sup>181</sup> Although the event was organized to show an example of bad paintings, one former Red Guard artist confesses to becoming curious with somewhat unrevolutionary motives about the old man's painting methods. Also, the *Black Painting Exhibition*, which was organized by the propaganda department of the Municipal Party Committee, was held in Shanghai in the spring of 1974. This exhibition showed artists of varied ages and styles, including paintings by Lin Fengmian and Wu Dayu. Although the *Black Painting Exhibition* was originally designed to display "bad samples," ironically, it actually provided an opportunity for visitors, although they were a selected group to be loyal to the Party, to see in person works different from the standard of the period.

Surprisingly, it is told that the styles of Liu Haisu and Yan Wenliang (颜文樑 1893-1988) were spread under the official Shanghai art world during the late years of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>182</sup> Their paintings were naturalistic landscapes and still lifes, yet with Impressionistic and Expressionistic touches. Again, this underground flow let Shanghai people know that in China there were different styles of art other than the narrowly conceived official art.

Through teachings, exhibitions, personal connections, and publications, the legacy of the modern art movement, specifically the nonnarrative and nonrealistic

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<sup>181</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 346.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 384.

approaches, as well as their spirit of searching for the new, had been passed down to the next generation, despite the harsh sociopolitical situations in China. It provided a forum through which young Shanghai artists could, relatively easily, escape from the realistic and narrative, formulating a ground for abstraction to blossom in the forthcoming era.

### *Blossom of Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai*

After the Cultural Revolution was finished, the Shanghai art world regained its energy for artistic experiments. Combined with the infrastructures of the past, new art platforms provided the perfect background for abstract art to thrive.

On the one hand, the remaining legacy of early generations was more officially propagated to the next generation in the post-Mao years. For example, many artists who were active in the early twentieth century were invited to teach at the Shanghai Theater Academy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is notable that Liu Haisu, Wu Dayu, and Guan Liang occasionally held several lectures at different art schools in Shanghai.<sup>183</sup>

Moreover, young artists had more chances to see the elder Shanghai artists' artworks in person than before and in other cities of China. In the early 1980s, their reputation was gradually recovered; thus, Shanghai held many exhibitions of these artists, such as Guan Liang's solo exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1982.

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<sup>183</sup> *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985* (Shanghai: Zendai Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 165.

This cultural legacy let young Shanghai artists more easily distance themselves from the official art of Mao and, perhaps, helped them to try something newer than what the senior artists already had done, so that they moved forward one step further toward abstract art.

Many Shanghai abstract artists also may have private lineages with modernist artists. Wu Dayu is believed to have resumed making abstract paintings in the late 1970s and welcomed guests and showed his works at home. Abstract artist Dai Hengyang remembers that he met Liu Haisu and interviewed with him in the 1970s.<sup>184</sup> Li Shan was exposed to the 1930s Shanghai modern artworks, as Shanghai had exhibitions of elder artists, such as Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian. In fact, Li Shan had a close relationship with Liu Haisu's student Chen Junde (陈钧德 b. 1937), who was teaching at the same school with Li Shan. Li Shan shared information of European modern art with him. Zhang Jianjun also recalled that the Impressionistic paintings that Chen Junde showed him were very impressive and that he saw paintings by Liu Haisu and Guan Liang, too.<sup>185</sup> Abstract ink painter Qiu Deshu met Wu Dayu and Liu Haisu in Shanghai in the late 1970s. In particular, Qiu frequently visited Liu Haisu's house on Chongqing south road and saw his paintings.<sup>186</sup> Qiu organized *Study*

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<sup>184</sup> *Turn to Abstract*, 173.

<sup>185</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, at Zhang Jianjun's house in Shanghai.

<sup>186</sup> Author interview with Qiu Deshu, August 30, 2012, at Qiu Deshu's studio in Shanghai.

*Exhibition* (习作展览) in 1978, which included paintings by old Shanghai artists, such as Liu Haisu, Pang Xunqin, and Wu Dayu. Qiu remembered that these artists had submitted similar works in their 1930s paintings.

On the other hand, 1980s Shanghai artists benefited from the new information arriving from abroad. Owing to Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy, encountering Euro-American abstract art turned out to be very common compared to the previous decades, as a plethora of articles and reproductions of abstract works appeared in various art journals. Nearly 100 years of Euro-American abstraction was introduced through introductory articles about contemporary foreign art.<sup>187</sup> Several articles were written specifically about European and American abstract painters. Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky were the two artists most frequently introduced.<sup>188</sup> Jackson

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<sup>187</sup> "Hundred Years of Contemporary Art" [Xindai huihua bainian 现代绘画百年], *Fine Arts* [Meishu 美术], (November 1982): 60-63. Abstract prints of Joseph Albers and Frank Stella were reprinted with explanations in "Selective introduction of American contemporary prints" [Meiguo xiandai banhua zuopin xuanjie 美国现代版画作品选介], *Art World* [Meishujie 美术界], no.3 (1988): 70-75.

<sup>188</sup> There are numerous articles about Mondrian and Kandinsky in different art journals. "Kandinsky and His Theory" [Kandingsiji qiren jiqi lilun 康定斯基其人及其理论], *World Art* [Shijie Meishu 世界美术], no. 4 (1983): 60-67.

"Mondrian's Cold Abstraction" [Mengdeliande lengchouxiang 蒙德里安的冷抽象], "Kandinsky's Brief Biography" [Kangdingsiji xiaozhuan 康定斯基小传], "Cold and Warm Abstraction" [leng re chouxiang huihua 冷热抽象绘画], *Chinese Art Newspaper* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报], no.6 (1985): 1.

"Brief Analysis on Art's Language of Abstraction" [Meishude Chouxiang yuyuan xiaoshi 美术的抽象语小释], *Journal of Jilin College of the Arts* [Jilin yishu xueyuan xuebao 吉林艺术学院学报], no. 1 (1985): 41-49.

"Kandinsky's Abstract Painting-Summer" [Kangdingsiji de chouxianghua-xia 康定斯基的抽象画-夏], *Chinese Art Newspaper* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报], no. 44 (1986): 4.

"Kandinsky's theory of abstract painting" [Kangdingsiji Chouxianghualun yanjiu 康定斯基

Pollock and American abstract expressionism,<sup>189</sup> DeKooning's 1970s abstract paintings,<sup>190</sup> and Paul Klee's abstract art were also displayed in color prints in various Chinese art journals.<sup>191</sup> Relatively not-so-famous American artists, such as Arthur Dove and Maxine Masterfield, were also introduced.<sup>192</sup> Not every article is detailed, but as one flips the pages of the art journals, it is easy to notice that varied information of abstract art of twentieth-century Europe and America was massively delivered to the 1980s Chinese art world.

Along with nationwide art journals, Shanghai gained better chances to perceive information from abroad. The most important reason for this is international

抽象画论研究], *Literature & Art Studies* [Wenyiyanyiu 文艺研究], (January, 1988): 144-160. "Kandinsky and Abstract Art" [Kangdingsiji yu chouxian yishu 康定斯基与抽象艺术], *Art Translation* [Meishu Yicong 美术译丛], no.1 (1981): 2-12.

<sup>189</sup> "Pollock and his Action Painting" [Boluo ke jiqi 'xingdong huihua' 波洛克及其'行动绘画'], "Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism," [Biaoxianzhuyi he chouxianbiaoxianzhuyi 表现主义和抽象表现主义], *Chinese Art Newspaper* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报], no.7 (1986): 4. "Appreciation of Abstractionism Art" [Chouxianzhuyi meishu xinshang 抽象主义美术欣赏], *Chinese Theater* [Zhongguo Xiju 中国戏剧], (March, 1989): 62-64. "Abstract Expressionism Artist Jackson Pollock" [Chouxianbiaoxianzhuyi huajia Jiekexun Boluo ke 抽象表现主义画家 杰克逊 波洛克], *Art Center* [Meiyuan 美苑], no.5 (1986): 58-59.

<sup>190</sup> "American Artist DeKooning" [Meiguohuajia Dekongning 美国画家德孔宁], *Chinese Art Newspaper* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报], no. 49 (1986): 4.

<sup>191</sup> "Paul Klee" [Baoluo Keli 保罗·克利], *Chinese Art Newspaper* [Zhongguo Meishubao 中国美术报], no. 11 (1988): 4.

<sup>192</sup> "Abstract Naturalism: Arthur Dove" [Chouxian ziranzhuyi: Ahse•Dafu 抽象自然注意: 阿瑟·达夫], *World Art* [Shijie Meishu 世界美术], no.3 (1986): 54-57. "Maxine Masterfield and Abstract Nationalism Group" [Maikesen•Maenfeide he chouxian ziranzhuyi huapai 麦克森·玛恩费德和抽象自然注意画派], *Fine Arts* [Meishu 美术], no. 5 (1986): 66-70.

book fairs in Shanghai. In 1978~1980, there were three big book fairs, one at the Shanghai Friendship Hall and two others at the foreign bookstore on Fuzhou Road. Art sections were located on the third floor of the foreign bookstore, and only related people who had non-sale tickets could access them. Art historian Shen Kuiyi, who was working at the Agricultural Exhibition Center in the late 1970s and at the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House (上海人民美术出版社) in the 1980s, noted that because no one wanted to deal with sending the books back, Shanghai, the last venue of the book fairs, got to keep all the books after each fair.<sup>193</sup> Portions of many books were collected by the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, the Shanghai Theater Academy, and the Shanghai Artists Association. Shanghai artists of the time were so eager to absorb new information from outside China that they spent all day at those places taking notes and making sketches.

The *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (波士顿博物馆美国名画原作展), which showed the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gave Shanghai artists a chance to see American abstract art of the mid-twentieth century in person. Since the relationship with the U.S. had been blocked during the previous decades, 1950s and 60s American art was totally new to Chinese artists. Held at the Shanghai Museum from October 20 to November 19 in 1981, it exhibited 70 American paintings, including abstract works by Jackson Pollock, Franz

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<sup>193</sup> Interview with Shen Kuiyi by the Asia Art Archive, July 27, 2007, in Hong Kong, as part of *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*. Asian Art Archive, [http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/skyft\\_201107041343596670.pdf](http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/skyft_201107041343596670.pdf) (accessed November 11, 2013).

Kline, Hans Hofmann, Helen Frankenthaler, and others. It was a sellout show and seems to have been greatly influential on Shanghai abstract artists. Li Shan, Qiu Deshu, Zhang Jianjun, Yu Youhan, and Ding Yi commonly count this exhibition as one of the most inspiring events. Zhang Jianjun and Qiu Deshu specifically recalled that Jackson Pollock's work was very impressive. In its catalogue, abstract painting (chouxianghua 抽象画) was translated as "art trend among modern Western artists in fashion, started from 1910: this group abandon real life story and specific objects of the world, on canvas, make abstract color and lines' "huisa" (free flow, 挥洒) by using geometric composition."<sup>194</sup>

Likewise, in its historical, political, and cultural aspects, 1980s Shanghai provided a highly fertile environment for abstract art to blossom. In the 1980s, incomparably abundant information on abstract art became accessible, and the sociopolitical situation became less strict, allowing artists to explore a new artistic language much more easily than before. Particularly in Shanghai, the local artistic legacy from the previous decades, such as the early modern artists' attempts to depart from realistic depictions and to experiment with pictorial elements, was passed down through personal lineages and underground teachings, which stimulated 1980s Shanghai artists to explore new ways of painting. Moreover, newly available information about contemporary foreign abstract art through art journals, art books,

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<sup>194</sup> *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* [Boshidun bowuguan Meiguo minghua yanzuozhan 波士顿博物馆美国名画原作展], (Beijing; Shanghai, 1981), 177.

and exhibitions during the 1980s nurtured the growth of abstract art. Abstract art was destined to flourish 1980s Shanghai, a dramatically warmed-up time and culturally rich location.

## CHAPTER 5

### Shanghai Abstract Paintings

#### *Li Shan*

Originally born in Heilongjiang, the northern part of China, Li Shan came to Shanghai in 1964 and studied stage design at the Shanghai Theater Academy. After graduation, he remained at the Shanghai Theater Academy as a young faculty member, where he taught basic drawing courses, such as landscape, still-life, and portrait. He was also ordered to paint propagandistic posters and political figures, but such works did not interest him. Li Shan instead maintained his secret love for early twentieth-century European modern art owing to the unique legacies of modern art remaining in Shanghai.

After keeping his passion for new art long-hidden, Li Shan was finally able to launch his exploration with various new styles when the cultural weather became milder as the Cultural Revolution finally ended with the death of Mao Zedong. Among his wide range of experiments, abstract art occupied one of the most important parts of his new stylistic investigation.

I want to highlight two significant aspects of Li Shan's early abstract works, such as "Order" (秩序), "Origins" (初始), and "Extension" (扩延). The first distinctive characteristic is Li Shan's emphasis on showing individuality. "Order" (illus. 5), which is thought to be his earliest abstract painting, is composed with eight vertical and six horizontal lines forming a grid pattern. Because Li Shan entirely

depended on his hand, none of these lines is accurately straight. The width of each line varies; some are thicker and others are thinner. The distances between each line are also irregular; some are further apart, while some are more intimate. Li Shan filled empty areas between the lines with small dots. Again, no circle is perfectly round; most of these 63 circles are somehow dented with varied sizes. All the dots are irregularly located in the grid pattern, with each inclined to one of the four directions: north, south, east or west. While some of them are squeezed into a void square, touching or overlapping the surrounding vertical and horizontal lines, some of them are floating within the boundary without touching their border lines. Altogether, Li Shan's "Order" is inherently disordered.

Art historian Rosalind Krauss argued that a grid is "emblematic of the modernist ambition," as it announces "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."<sup>195</sup> Li Shan's grid, however, does not perfectly fit Krauss's description, because it displays a unique level of personality created by the artist's arbitrary hand gesture. Li Shan did not pursue accurate calculations, straightness, and regularity in the vein of Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, and Carl Andre. Unlike the grids of these American artists, whose works are "flattened, geometricized, ordered,"<sup>196</sup> as Krauss describes them, Li Shan's grids of casual strokes and dots exhibit variations, differences, and arbitrariness. Hence, in contrast to

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<sup>195</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

the American Minimalists' opaque paintings that erased all hints of the art-making process, Li Shan's grids clearly display the artist's hand movements and sequences of strokes. This is due to the semi-transparent quality made of the usage of ink, the brush, and the paper. Through brush strokes and dots that cross over each other, we can sense Li Shan's hand gestures—the speed, the quivering. In this regard, Li Shan's grid piece embodies more human sentiment than his American counterparts. Although Li Shan's work does not explicitly deliver a specific story, it is not completely silent, either; the artist and his voice are still present. If Li Shan's grid is modern, it is not because it serves as “a paradigm or model for the anti-developmental, the anti-narrative, the anti-historical,”<sup>197</sup> but because it is a newly possible form in a new society.

“Origins” is another series that contains abstract paintings. Some paintings from this series display Li Shan's highly dynamic brushstrokes. In “Origins-Hemudu Culture 1” (初始-先河文字 illus. 6), the energetic movements of the artist's hand are sensed through vigorous strokes. Li Shan dashed off many lines in white, green, and black with various brush sizes on the canvas unevenly painted in earthy colors. Like “Order,” abstract works of the “Origins Series” deliver a sense of the artist's gestural brush works.

Evident brush strokes are frequently regarded as the expression of the artist's self or identified as an artist's unique marks. In Chinese traditional painting or calligraphy, the brush stroke has been considered as one individual artist's or an art

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 22.

group's distinctive mark. Ma Yuan (馬遠 c. 1160–65 – 1225)'s rat-tail or nail-head stroke and Fan Kuan (范寬 990–1020)'s axe-cut stroke are examples. The concept of the artist's expressive brushworks was maintained in 1980s China, as reflected by Jiang Wenzhan (江文湛)'s article arguing that abstract brush strokes of ink painting were a way to express one's feelings and life force, which he believed is the essence of Chinese tradition.<sup>198</sup> In European art history, brushworks were also often interpreted as the expression of an artist. Van Gogh's vigorous brushworks, for instance, tend to be considered as indicating his fervent, passionate, and energetic characteristics. In this regard, visible touches in Li Shan's works could be read as the manifestation of himself as an individual artist.

Another indicator of the artist's individuality is Li Shan's signature on his paintings. Li Shan started to sign his name since as early as 1978, continuously inserting his signature—not in a small size, either—in almost every painting. His signature on paintings is declaring that he is the individual creator and owner of the works.

Signatures on his paintings mark a significant difference from the works that Li Shan was involved with during the Cultural Revolution. In Mao's China, individualism was identified as a serious error, as it was regarded as the opposite of

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<sup>198</sup> Jiang Wenzhan 江文湛, "Understanding of Abstract Beauty" [Qiantan bimode chouxiang mei 浅谈笔墨的抽象美], *Fine Art* [Meishu 美术], no.7 (1982): 8-10.

collectivism.<sup>199</sup> Individuality, especially the artist's self, was, thus, largely neglected in art production. Theme and style were most likely predetermined by the officials, and most of the art-making process was a product of team work under the Communist Party's restrictions, which allowed no individual style, taste, or private possessions.<sup>200</sup> Thus, there was no possibility or need for artists to leave their names visibly on their artworks. However, after the Cultural Revolution, individuality started to replace collectivity. Existentialism arrived in China from France, and books by Sartre and Nietzsche were considered "must-reads" among artists. Taking an individual path as an artist was essential, particularly in Shanghai. As Li Shan states, Shanghai artists wanted to do things differently from each other and form their own unique style.<sup>201</sup> I regard Li Shan's signature as reflecting this new historical and specific geographical setting, one that emphasized artist's individuality.

Li Shan's visible brushstrokes and signature are not the only hints of individuality in his work. To contemporary Shanghai artists, abstract art itself could mean the manifestation of their individuality, as it was thought to be self-expressive art

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<sup>199</sup> Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 209.

<sup>200</sup> Most of the time, selected artists were assembled to discuss the subject matter, and once they agreed on the subject matter, the organizer distributed the materials to them. Then artists started to make sketches. After the sketches were approved, they were able to produce the final painting.

<sup>201</sup> Interview with Li Shan by the Asia Art Archive, March 4, 2009, in Shanghai, as part of *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*. Asian Art Archive, [http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/lsftfinal\\_201105091421584336.pdf](http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/lsftfinal_201105091421584336.pdf) (accessed October 12, 2013).

in modern China. During the Republican period, Zheng Wuchang (郑午昌 1894-1952) related Kandinsky's belief in abstract art to the art of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), which prioritized expressing one's thoughts and feelings over realistic representation.<sup>202</sup> Articles about abstract art in 1980s art journals commonly stated that abstraction is to express an artist's self. Qian Jinfan, for example, argued that abstract art is a tool to express an artist's feelings,<sup>203</sup> and Yang Aiqi noted that abstraction, which focuses on the mutations of lines and colors, is a way to express artists' inner feelings.<sup>204</sup> Li Shan himself also confessed that the reason he started abstract art was to fight against the standardized artworks, meaning he perceived a binary distinction between abstract art as individual expression and propagandistic works as controlled outcome.<sup>205</sup> Although abstract art was not always seen as a form of personal expression in other countries, Chinese artists and scholars considered it as an art of self-expression.

In his "Extension Series" in the mid-1980s, Li Shan seems to have extended his interest in his artistic individuality to valuing an individual's life more generally. "Extension 2" (illus. 7) is filled with moving energy that eludes one's birth or life. The

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<sup>202</sup> Zheng Wuchang's article was published in the October issue of *Cultural Construction* [文化建设] in 1934.

<sup>203</sup> Qian Jinfan, "Delivering Feelings and Abstraction—Two Basic Principles of Chinese Painting," 54.

<sup>204</sup> Yang Aiqi, "About Abstraction in Painting," 20.

<sup>205</sup> Author interview with Li Shan, April 19, 2013, in Shanghai.

halves of two circles that are not perfectly round semi-circles are situated at the left and right side of the canvas in white, skin pink, and light violet. Black spiky lines are attached to the outline of each circle. These lines are aimed toward the middle of the canvas and are slightly more crowded in the middle end of each semi-circle. Also denser in the middle, a mixture of violet, gray, white, and dark blue pigments seem to be pulled out from the circles. Overall, this painting delivers a sense that the circles are moving toward or against each other with enough speed to make the background vibrate with waves of pigments. If the two circles are moving toward each other, they remind the viewer of eggs, as Wu Liang described them as the “embryo of life,”<sup>206</sup> with the fluttering spiky lines resembling sperm and their swimming-like movement hinting at fertilization. If we read these circles as departing from each other, then this painting gives the impression of cell division. Li Shan’s interest in life is noticeable not only in “Extension Series” but also in his “Origins Series” in the 1980s, the “Rouge Series” (胭脂) in the 1990s, and the “Reading Series” (读书) in the 2000s.

Such a biomorphic theme may have arisen from Li Shan’s fervent readings about science in the early 1980s, or it could be related to his daughter Li Yang’s birth in 1976.<sup>207</sup> However, it could also be analyzed within the zeitgeist of the late 1970s and early 1980s in China. During this period, voices that cried out for the dignity of each individual rose loudly in opposition to the collectivist emphasis of Mao’s rule.

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<sup>206</sup> Wu Liang 误亮, *Building the “Rouge Empire”: Paintings from 1976 to 1992* (Hong Kong, 1994), 15.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Li Shan by the Asia Art Archive, March 4, 2009, in Shanghai, as part of *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*.

More specifically, discussion of humanism and alienation was initiated in 1981 when Party thinkers began to debate about an early Karl Marx writing, *1844 Manuscript on Economics and Philosophy*. They proposed that young Marx emphasized humanism and that he viewed society as the cause of human alienation. Their discussion of humanism raised issues of human value, human position, human dignity, and human rights.<sup>208</sup> In addition, Existentialism, which was in vogue, fanned the flames of passion for humanism, resulting in reconsideration of the meaning of individual life. Li Shan, who shared common sentiments and interests with the time, must have pondered this issue and expressed his thoughts through his paintings. That is, Li Shan's abstract paintings reflect the artist's interest in identity as an individual and the sentiments of the time.

The second significant aspect of Li Shan's works is the mixture of various styles and sources in his paintings. To illustrate, Li Shan explored both the figurative and abstract simultaneously throughout the 1980s. In his "Origins Series," for instance, abstract and figurative paintings coexist. "Origins-Home Town" (故乡 illus. 8) displays dogs, a naked person, and trees, and "Origins-Harmony 1" (和睦之一 illus. 9) shows bare trees, white houses, muscular bodies and masks. In contrast, "Origins-Rhythmical Signs" (符號的节奏 illus. 10) contains no recognizable figures. In addition to abstract paintings, Li Shan also painted highly simplified, yet obviously recognizable, flowers and portraits in acrylics in the 1980s.

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<sup>208</sup> Julia Andrews, "Fragmented Memory: An Introduction," in *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde Exile*, eds. Julia Andrews and Gao Minglu (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1993), 6.

This implies that the division between the figurative and abstract was not so essential to the artist, a tendency that can be related to the concept of abstraction in 1980s China. As illustrated in Chapter Three, abstraction was understood as an on-going process of capturing the essentials of an object and delivering the artist's thoughts and personality, closely related to literati painting. In other words, to 1980s Chinese artists, abstraction generally meant simplifying figures or extracting the essence of an object, rather than the complete elimination of recognizable figures. Therefore, there was no reason for Li Shan to completely erase figures from his works to pursue abstract painting. In his mindset, the figurative and abstract were not in contradiction; there is no clear boundary between them, and they can always coexist.

Not only did he mix the abstract and figurative, but Li Shan also collected bits of various twentieth-century Euro-American art styles and displayed them in one painting. "Origins-Harmony 1," for example, shows an unmatched combination of a semi-naked woman, a carnivorous and an herbivorous animal in an Henri Rousseau-style primeval forest. "Origins 5" (illus. 11) is reminiscent of Informel works, like Jean Dubuffet's human paintings. "Extension—The Transition" (混沌) reminds the viewer of Franz Kline's black-and-white abstract paintings. The list of citations goes on: van Gogh's brush strokes applied for yellow flowers are visible in "Still Life" (景物 illus. 12); German Expressionism's dark outlines and somber colors are noticeable in portraits such as "Young Girl" (少女 illus. 13) and "A Portrait of Laozi" (老子画像); and Matisse-like bright colors stand in strong contrast in "Flower 9" (花). That is,

the stream of Euro-American modern art flows in Li Shan's late 1970s and 1980s paintings.

Furthermore, Li Shan referenced Chinese indigenous culture for his inspiration. His search for the origin of human beings in "Origins-Harmony 1" reminds the viewer of the spirits of Gauguin and Rousseau; however, the dark, murky, gloomy landscape is not Henri Rousseau's tropical island but a reflection of Li Shan's hometown in Heilongjiang Province. In the "Origins Series," spherical masks, the circular eyes, straight noses from Jiangjun Cliff and symbolic signs of Hemudu culture represent the traces of Chinese cave paintings. In other words, Li Shan's sources of inspiration in the late 1970s to and 1980s were miscellaneous collections of foreign modern art and Chinese indigenous culture.

Among many possible reasons for such a mixture of various styles and use of different sources, I want to count China's sociopolitical change as the most significant factor. As mentioned in Chapter Four, European and American modern art was massively imported into China after Mao's death. The Chinese accepted nearly 100 years of Euro-American art without categorization or any in-depth, theoretical understanding. Needless to say, Shanghai, which has long interacted with foreign countries, was more open to this overwhelming influx of new foreign information. Simultaneously, classics of ancient Chinese philosophy and religion became available to the people. In the 1980s, artists could fall in love with every style and rely on an overwhelmingly large spectrum of images and texts—anything and everything from the past and present, from the foreign and indigenous.

The effect of the widened range of choices was maximized, along with loosened political requests for artists, beginning in the late 1970s. After the Cultural Revolution, strict rules on the arts dramatically dwindled. Artistic pluralism was officially announced (although some vague boundaries still existed), and artists were able to select their favorites. Against this background, Li Shan assembled all of his own favorite styles and applied them into his works.

This stream of images gave artists multiple roles to play. An artist was no longer an emulator of his or her master or a reproducer of the Communist Party ideology. With freedom, an artist became a viewer of the extreme ranges of images, a collector of his or her favorite styles among them, and an editor with artistic creativity regarding the selected sources with artistic creativity. As his various paintings demonstrate, Li Shan completely fulfilled every role.

### *Zhang Jianjun*

Born in Shanghai in 1955, Zhang Jianjun was eleven when the Cultural Revolution began. Zhang has confessed that he was very scared of the social atmosphere of the time, especially in the early years of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>209</sup> During that time, the Red Guards dropped into Zhang's house without advance notice and hit his father, accusing him of being a bourgeois. When little Zhang went outside, children threw stones at him, criticizing him as the child of a prosperous family. Zhang also remembers his neighbor's suicide at his British-style apartment on the Bund due

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<sup>209</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, in Shanghai.

to political suppressions.

Zhang Jianjun stayed home when all official education temporarily paused from 1967 to 1969, but as formal education resumed in 1969, he started attending school again. It was at Qiujiang High School in the Hongkou District of Shanghai that Zhang Jianjun decided to study art in depth, as one of the art teachers saw Zhang's artistic talent. The art teacher, a painter himself, taught Zhang Jianjun the Soviet-style realist paintings and propaganda works after school. Then, when they had built a trusting relationship, the teacher secretly showed Zhang Jianjun classical and modern European paintings that the teacher had collected during the Republican period.

After graduating from high school, Zhang Jianjun passed the entrance examination of the Shanghai Theater Academy, which required him to draw a real model realistically with charcoal or crayon. After three years as a student, Zhang was assigned to be a professor at the Academy from 1978 through 1980.

In 1979, Zhang Jianjun began to delve into abstract art in earnest.<sup>210</sup> Zhang recalled that it was his field trips to Chinese Buddhist sites, such as the Dunhuang (敦煌石窟) and Longmen Caves (龙门石窟) and the Yonghe lama temple (雍和宫), that opened a new arena of abstract art for him. Particularly in 1979 when he stayed at the Dunhuang Cave Institute for about a year and copied the wall paintings there, Zhang

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<sup>210</sup> From 1975 to 1978, Zhang Jianjun experimented with various styles and themes, such as a girl under a tree in Impressionistic pastel colors, a still-life with Fauvist-like rough brushstrokes, and highly abstracted landscapes. Because Zhang was fond of the Fauvist style, he recalls that his friends called him "Fauve Zhang." In this period as a student at the Shanghai Theater Academy, he seemed to explore as many diverse styles as possible. Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, in Shanghai.

Jianjun became very interested in the two-dimensionality and decorativeness of the cave paintings.<sup>211</sup> More specifically, he was deeply fascinated by depicting figures in simple forms, the formal beauty of lines and colors, and delivering messages without making believable space, all of which are very different from what Mao's China had emphasized, namely realistic depictions and propagandistic stories. These trips also opened his eyes to Chinese traditional art.

After those trips, Zhang Jianjun produced several pieces of abstract work, such as "Trees, Pond, and a Bird" (树林, 池塘和小鸟 illus. 14) and "Moon, Sun, and a Human of Yin Xu Age" (殷墟时代的月亮太阳和人 illus. 15). Simplified figures of these paintings remind viewers of Joan Miro or Paul Klee, but according to Zhang Jianjun, inspiration for these works came from a different source, which was old Chinese characters. "Trees, Pond, and a Bird," for example, came from old Chinese calligraphy, Da Zhuan (大篆), the style of writing used in the inscriptions cast into the bronze vessels in China during the first and second century B.C.<sup>212</sup> Ancient Chinese people simplified an object's figure to make a word indicating that object. For example, they simplified the figure of a tree and made a Chinese character "木" (mu) that signifies a tree. Zhang Jianjun referenced this method when he created "Trees, Pond, and a Bird." He explained that the white brushstrokes on the right represent

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<sup>211</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, in Shanghai.

<sup>212</sup> Da Zhuan literally means "greater seal," which is also called Zhou. This was the style of writing used in the numerous inscriptions cast into the bronze vessels, both secular and sacred, of the Late Shang and, in far greater numbers, the Chou dynasties.

trees, the yellow triangle on the left represents a pond, and a dark green figure on the upper left is a bird. Like ancient Chinese people, Zhang Jianjun summarized the appearance of concrete objects and developed highly abstracted, borrowing his word, “conceptual landscapes.”<sup>213</sup>

Another work, “Moon, Sun and a Human of Yin Xu Age,” seems to be an abstract painting at a first glance, but the title implies that it contains certain figures. A Sun-like circle and a Moon-like semi-circle are displayed in the upper part, and a human-looking black figure is standing at the right below. Zhang Jianjun once again appropriated the way of making Chinese characters to make this painting. Altogether, these figures remind us of Chinese poems, which portrayed a human praying to the moon or to the sun in ancient China.

At the same time, Zhang Jianjun was inspired by European abstract art. As I have illustrated in Chapter Four, Zhang Jianjun was exposed to European abstract works, such as Miro, Klee, and Kandinsky, by seeing art books at the Shanghai Theater Academy library in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Around the same time when Zhang Jianjun was exploring what he calls conceptual landscape, he also created paintings lacking any referent to concrete objects, being influenced by European abstract artworks, especially Kandinsky’s. For example, Zhang applied Kandinsky-like methods to make “Pathetique” (悲怆 illus. 16). He completed this painting within four hours after listening to Tchaikovsky’s “Symphony No. 6 Pathetic.” The result was

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<sup>213</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, September 13, 2013 at the Power Station of Art, Shanghai.

a composition only with spontaneous, strong black lines.

Zhang Jianjun's works in the late 1970s and early 1980s tell us that he was influenced by various sources and experimented with diverse ways to paint. After a few years of his stylistic explorations, Zhang Jianjun succeeded in making his unique abstract work in the early 1980s.

“Eternal Dialogue” (永远的对话 illus. 17), produced in 1982, is a milestone—both in the sense of technique and of content. One of the most captivating points is the work's crudeness. Sophisticated qualities are hardly found in this piece. The boundary of the work is not clearly cut, reminding us of a stone block in an ancient tomb. The outer shape is not rightly square, as the line of the left side is slightly inclined to the right. None of the angles of the four edges is a correct ninety degrees, evoking the sense of worn down stone again. The process of making this work does not contain artistic fineness, either. Like a plaster, Zhang Jianjun put layers of sand, pebbles, and oil pigments on linen. On the upper left side and a comparatively small part of the lower right, the materiality of the pebbles and stones is apparently shown. At the upper right side, he painted a circle and a thin, upright hemisphere shape with black lines. Because of the irregular surface, these thick, black lines could not be executed finely; some parts are broken, and the cream color of the surfaces is shown occasionally, making the resistance between the surface and shapes recognizable. Also, instead of a calligraphic stroke that a master dashes off, Zhang seems to retouch these seemingly spontaneous lines many times. The cracks of the surface suggest again that a long time had passed. The intended crudeness of this

painting delivers the impression of enduring time, as the title suggests, and it became his main theme in the following years.

It is Zhang Jianjun's usage of mixed media that generates such crudity. For "Eternal Dialogue," he pasted sand and pebbles on linen and painted a circle and a half oval with oil pigments. This method to combine different kinds of media has been around since 1981. Materials became more and more diverse as Zhang included stones, branches, glasses and knobs. He also mixed traditional materials, such as rice paper and Chinese ink, with foreign materials, such as oil, acrylics, and canvas. This point is striking, considering that it was rare to see such mixed media works in the early 1980s Chinese art world. Zhang Jianjun's mixed media abstract work was totally new, both in terms of its abstract appearance (opposite of the figurative paintings in the proceeding decades) and diverse materials on one canvas (different from the typical oil and ink medium).

Zhang Jianjun's combination of multiple materials was intensified in the "Noumenon Series" (有), probably his most remarkable series that began in 1984. For example, in "Noumenon No. 59" (illus. 18), Zhang Jianjun employed pebbles, sand, fine sailcloth, and rice paper for the upper left background and then painted a large, semi-transparent, creamy white circle with oil pigments. This circle shows a rough surface due to the mixed materials. Zhang Jianjun also attached eight short branches uprightly in the circle. The remaining area is colored in black, gray, and white oil colors in a relatively smooth surface, though the texture of toilet paper is slightly recognizable.

For some of the “Noumenon Series,” Zhang Jianjun applied larger and heavier materials, making his work more like a three-dimensional installation. For instance, in “Noumenon No. 70” (illus. 19), the artist hung a real stone at the top center of the painting using a crude string, making string and stone symmetrically divide the work to form another dimension. Small stones were pasted on the brownish cream surface with a grayish block on the above area where branches are inserted upright. In this way, Zhang Jianjun engaged with the real space by aggressively applying real objects in his abstract paintings.

Zhang Jianjun’s interdisciplinary education at the Shanghai Theater Academy was possibly provided one reason for his unique experiment with different materials and multiple dimensions. Zhang said that the curriculum at the Theater Academy required students to interact with different departments, such as the Writing, Stage Design, and Fine Arts Departments, which let students experience different spheres from their major.<sup>214</sup> Zhang Jianjun was majoring in oil paintings in the Fine Arts Department, but he frequently visited the Stage Art Department and had close relationships with teachers and students there, which were less bounded by the standardized oil paintings of Mao’s era and were more engaged with large, three-dimensional spaces and artistic experiments. Zhang’s close relationship with the Stage Art Department and his interdisciplinary experience at the Academy would have enhanced his concern with three-dimensional space and inspired him to be less standardized and more experimental.

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<sup>214</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, in Shanghai.

In regards to the subject matter, “Noumenon Series” succeeded Zhang Jianjun’s early interest in time. In “Noumenon No. 59” (illus. 18), for instance, Zhang painted a large semi-transparent, creamy white circle in oil and made it rough by attaching small pebbles, sand, and eight short branches. An interesting point of this work is that it is sufficiently allusive for the viewer to conjure up the full moon in the night sky. The unclear outline of the circle gives the impression of a halo. Roughly painted cream pigments and scratches on it remind viewers of the surface of the moon, and small bubbles look similar to the moon’s craters. A smooth, dark background colored in black, gray, and white oil paint highlights the texture and brightness of the moon-like circle. This painting can be read as the moon connecting it to time, for the moon has traditionally been used as an indicator of time to the Chinese people. They used to calculate time based on the lunar calendar and, even today, the Chinese celebrate the Chunjie (New Year’s Day 春节) and Zhongqiujie (Thanksgiving Day 中秋节) according to the lunar calendar. Zhang expressed a very abstract concept, time, in an extremely concrete way as he applied various materials to evoke a sense of the tangibility of the work. Moreover, the title, Noumenon (有), emphasizes the physical existence of the applied materials, proclaims the existence of his abstract painting, and protests the existence of invisible time.

In the same vein, “Noumenon No. 70” (illus. 19) makes viewers think once again of Zhang Jianjun’s main theme, eternity against passing time, as a hung stone is reminiscent of a pendulum, since the pendulum-stone is stilled, and time is frozen in this work.

Although the style is different, Zhang Jianjun's "Human Beings with their Clock No. 1" (人类和他们的钟 illus. 20) also illustrates the same theme, the eternal being against the passage of time. In this horizontally long and large painting, Zhang Jianjun collected people of different ages, genders, and races. They are placed on the same horizon, but the light is coming in from different directions, confusing the viewer about which time and space they actually exist in. A white, round figure that reminds us of a circle in the "Noumenon Series" is situated at the back. People in the painting look very puzzled. To cite the artist's explanation for the reason for their perplexity, they are confused by their existence: where they came from, who they are, and where they are going.<sup>215</sup> These three questions effectively encapsulate Zhang Jianjun's ontological theme, which has continued from the beginning of his abstract works.

A noteworthy point here is that Zhang Jianjun regards "Human Beings with their Clock" as abstract art, because, according to him, it discusses the same abstract theme as other abstract works, although their appearance is quite different.<sup>216</sup> That is, to Zhang Jianjun, abstract art meant one way to express his continuous interest in an eternal existence over time, rather than a certain style or a genre.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the color of Zhang Jianjun's works. Noticeably, Zhang Jianjun has rarely used bright colors since 1982. He limits his

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<sup>215</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, September 13, 2013, at the Power Station of Art in Shanghai.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

palette to several monotonous colors, such as black, gray, creamy white, and a little bit of brownish pigments. He varies the range of brightness and transparency of these colors, but he seldom applies stunning pigments for his abstract works. A low chroma can be related to Chinese ink painting and calligraphy tradition. Zhang Jianjun recalls that his father practiced calligraphy every morning; thus, he naturally absorbed sentiments of ink, which unconsciously influenced his later works.<sup>217</sup>

Beyond such traditional and personal aspects, monotonous colors in his works also inherently suggest resisting the art of the previous era, even if it is unintentional. In Mao's China, artworks were ordered to use bright colors to deliver cheerful sentiments. Artists' palettes were requested to be filled with various bright colors, and it became the canon to depict Mao as "bright, red, shiny." Paintings with dark colors were discriminated against as depicting socialist China as drab and dull. In this sense, Zhang's muted colors are an innovation that is defiantly different from the preceding decades, even a denial of their arts.

Zhang Jianjun's monotonous colors became more apparent as he more aggressively employed ink on rice paper from the late 1980s on. In "Nature Series" (自然系列 illus. 21), for example, Zhang Jianjun used various sizes and tones of ink brushstrokes to deliver a sense of water flow. At this point, it is noticeable that the main theme remained the same as his other series, although he changed the medium. To be more specific, the old Chinese saying describes time as being like flowing water

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<sup>217</sup> Author interview with Zhang Jianjun, August 29, 2012, in Shanghai.

(歲月流水). Given that, this painting can be read as representing the flow of time, depending on water-like visual effects.

As a director of the Art Research Department of the Shanghai Art Museum and as a Vice-Chairman of the Shanghai Youth Artists Association from 1986, Zhang Jianjun actively participated in the Shanghai art world in the late 1980s. His works were exhibited in various local and international galleries. Indeed, his solo show was held at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1987, where “Human Beings and Their Clock No. 2” and several abstract ink works were displayed. Zhang Jianjun submitted three works of the “Noumenon Series” at the grand *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in 1989 at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. He also gained international experience. In 1986, he visited New York for a year as a beneficiary of the Asia Art Council program. Moreover, his works were exhibited in Hong Kong, California, Boston, and Chicago. Zhang’s activities prove that the latter years of the 1980s were comparatively less difficult for artists to experiment with abstract art.

However, the sociopolitical situation became tense towards the late 1980s, and the cultural atmosphere dramatically cooled down after the Tiananmen Square tragedy in June 1989. Zhang Jianjun stated that he was so scared that the Cultural Revolution would be revived. Such fear made Zhang Jianjun decide to move to the United States. Helped by the Nerlino Gallery in Soho, Manhattan, which he got to know when he visited New York from 1986 to 1987, Zhang Jianjun settled down in New York City.

When Zhang visited Shanghai again in 1995, he found that some of his abstract paintings were severely damaged, mainly because no one took care of his

remaining works in Shanghai where the weather is very humid. As a result, many paintings had shrunk or become moldy. The remaining abstract works in Shanghai themselves became visual documents about the passage of time, asking if there is something that eternally exists over time.

### *Qiu Deshu*

Born in 1948 in Shanghai, Qiu Deshu joined the Red Guards when he was a middle school student. Because he received drawing training through private lessons and art classes, Qiu possessed a good ability with drawing, oil painting, and ink painting.<sup>218</sup> Thus, when he joined the Red Guards, Qiu became one of the Party's favorite worker-artists, gaining opportunities to participate in art lessons and to participate in national exhibitions. Like other worker-artists during Mao's regime, Qiu devoted all his energy to painting portraits of Chairman Mao and making propaganda cartoons and woodblock prints of revolutionary themes for the Party's commissions.

Serial cartoons (连环画) were one of the major tasks that Qiu Deshu undertook as a worker-artist. "Song at the Crest of the Wave" (浪尖上的歌 illus. 22), for example, was produced during his six months' training at the Workers Art Creation

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<sup>218</sup> Qiu Deshu's parents hired an old traditional Chinese painter (Zhang Zhichen 张之尘) as his private tutor. Every week middle school student Qiu Deshu went to his home to have lessons. From the teacher, he studied watercolor, ink painting and oil painting. "A dialogue between artist Qiu Deshu and Asia Art Archive Chair Jane DeBevoise." on the occasion of the exhibition, *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985*, curated by Kuiyi Shen and Julia F. Andrews, and presented at the China Institute (September 15 to December 11, 2011), Asian Art Archive, <http://www.aaa-a.org/2011/11/21/conversation-with-qiudeshu> (accessed October 14, 2013).

Classes in 1970 and 1973 at the Shanghai Art School (上海美术专科学校).<sup>219</sup> The story of this work is very simple and obvious; a country boy rescues a drowning person and is praised. The theme and the way Qiu tells the story are typical of the Mao style, in the sense that the work shows an ideal model of a brave young hero of the people, and the narrative is didactic and easily understood.

It is noteworthy that the process of producing serial cartoons concealed the individuality of an artist. To make serial cartoons, divided sections were granted to several artists after their themes and sketches were approved by the art bureau under the Party. Among the entire serial cartoons, four sections were given to Qiu Deshu, who drew and painted them. His name was written on the back of the four pieces of paper. Nevertheless, at the *Worker-Artist Exhibition* (工人美展) in 1974, the official production of this cartoon was attributed to the whole group, and Qiu's name was deleted. This was because signing one's name or attributing a work to a particular artist could be considered a form of individualism, which was regarded as a violation of the collectivist ideology.

Another anecdote further illustrates how precarious it was to exhibit an artist's individuality at the time. During his free time, Qiu Deshu used pencils and thin brushes to draw sketches of fishermen, factory workers, and soldiers. The sketches by no means betrayed the Party's guidance on art. Qiu used a realistic style, and the

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<sup>219</sup> Qiu was assigned to work at a leather factory. At the factory, Qiu became famous for his artistic talent, and this fame brought him an opportunity to further his art education by studying at for Workers Art Creation Classes held at the Shanghai Art School co-organized by the Art School and the Shanghai Peoples' Art Publishing House.

models were workers and soldiers, who represented the themes most favored by the Party. The potential danger of these drawings, however, was detected in the technique. The artist made his personal technique by pushing the wood of the pencil into the paper to create textured indentations. Qiu did so because he valued establishing his own style, even within the government's restrictions. Due to these small marks, however, Qiu was told by his colleagues that he needed to be careful, as his sketches suggested his own, unique style.<sup>220</sup> Since exhibiting one's own style was considered a sign of individualism, which was deemed to be "corrupt" at the time, his friends thought Qiu could be in big trouble with the government due to even the smallest hints of individual technique.

These stories indicate the extremely strict cultural control during the Cultural Revolution of the early 1970s. As Qiu Deshu's experiences tell us, Chinese art of the time was so limited both in style and content that any work that suggested even very small personal traces of an artist could be suspected as an ideological violation.

Suffocating regulations gave way to hope for artistic freedom as Mao's era moved toward its end. Qiu Deshu faced a pivotal moment that inspired a passion to change his work when he went to the National Gallery in Beijing to exhibit "Rushing to the Front Line" (争分夺秒) in 1975. The exhibition was supposed to be an honorable occasion with ideal works selected by the Party, but Qiu recalls that he was deeply disappointed by the inferior techniques and uniformity of the artworks at the

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<sup>220</sup> Author interview with Qiu Deshu, August 30, 2012 at Qiu Deshu's studio in Shanghai.

show.<sup>221</sup> This experience eventually developed Qiu's passion to create a new style of painting, which is identifiably his, both in terms of form and content.

The chance for a new artistic direction came with the continuous, dramatic events following Mao's death, the arrest of the Gang of Four, and the end of the Cultural Revolution in fall 1976. In 1977, Qiu was moved from the factory to the Luwan District Cultural Palace, a people's art center under the leadership of the Propaganda Department of the District Bureau of Culture where he worked as a worker-artist (美工). There he managed all different kinds of art-related works, such as organizing art education classes, curating exhibitions, and making posters and advertisements for movies and plays at the Cultural Palace.<sup>222</sup> After work, Qiu passionately experimented with new ways of expression, hoping to make artworks that were recognizably his own, and he turned toward abstract art in this search for the individual expression.

In the late 1970s, Qiu Deshu explored various themes and sources, and many of his works exhibited qualities of abstract art; his works with Chinese characters serve as great examples. "Abstract Space" (抽象空间 illus. 23), for example, was

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Qiu Deshu organized four or five exhibitions. For the annual *Spring Festival Art Exhibitions* of 1978 and 1979, he invited senior artists to participate—artists who had been condemned during the Cultural Revolution but had not yet been politically rehabilitated. Among them were Liu Haisu, Qian Juntao, Xie Zhiliu, Lu Yanshao, Ying Yeping, and Tang Yun. In 1978, Qiu also organized an exhibition of landscapes and other apolitical subjects by Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts' ink-painting faculty members Shu Chuanxi, Lu Kunfeng, and Hong Shiqing. Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974-1985*, 104.

inspired by freely brushed, archaic-style pictographic characters written on oracle bones in ancient China. These pictographic forms inherit a tendency to change the appearances of objects into a simple form. In a similar vein, Qiu's paintings during this period, such as "Rhythm of Stream" (溪的演奏 illus. 24), "Ideal Landscape" (理想山水), "Island in Fantasy" (幻想中的宝岛), and "Under the Sunshine" (阳光下) are highly abstracted landscape. At first glance, "Rhythm of Stream" seems to be a combination of strong color blocks and black and blue lines, where the composition is unrealistic, dominating black brush strokes are too strong, figures are hardly recognizable, and colors are arbitrarily chosen. That is, Qiu escaped from painting a landscape in a realistic manner and freely explored a different way of visual expression.

Qiu Deshu developed his studies of abstract qualities in the 1980s, which was around the time when he went through a severe criticism due to the Caocao exhibition in 1980. In fact, the years between 1980 and the end of 1983 when Qiu was being subjected to criticism were the most active for his experiments in abstract ink paintings.

During this time, Qiu Deshu splashed or poured ink on the surface of Chinese paper, aiming to be entirely different from the art of Mao both visually and thematically. In "Empty No. 1" (空 #1 illus. 25), for example, Qiu did not intend to make any recognizable figures but just let the ink flow to create abstract visual effects. His rough brushstrokes and accidental effects are located at the opposite end of the spectrum from the meticulous renderings and preplanned compositions he had made in

the 1970s. There is no propagandistic story, either. It is just splashes of ink, telling no specific narrative.

Such new aspects remind viewers of dripping techniques of several foreign and Chinese artists. Qiu's splashing works resemble Jackson Pollock's drippings, which Qiu saw in person at the *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* in Shanghai in 1981 and recalls to be the most inspiring work at the exhibition. In the search for his styles of art, Qiu possibly adopted this new technique and modified it in his way, not knowing the theoretical or art historical background of Pollock's work.<sup>223</sup> Qiu's technique also evokes works of the ink splashes of Chinese masters such as Shitao (石涛 1642–1707), Fu Baoshi (傅抱石 1904-1965), and Zhang Daqian (張大千 1899-1983), but Qiu's work is different from theirs in that it lacks specific figures. Qiu Deshu's theme differs radically from traditional Chinese ink painting, because it departs from landscape, birds and flowers, which have been its most common themes.

Beyond ink splashing and dripping, Qiu Deshu's experiment reached as far as using seals as medium. He sometimes incorporated red seals with black ink painting, such as "Days and Nights" (illus. 26), and often made all-over seal paintings like "Seal of the Universe." In both cases, the usage of seals betrays their use in the tradition of Chinese ink painting. Previously, seals were not the main instruments for ink painting; rather, they were secondary tools to indicate possession, stamped at the periphery by

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<sup>223</sup> Chinese paper that Qiu Deshu used makes it easy for ink to be spread, so the autonomy of brush and ink become much greater than in Pollock's

artists and collectors of works. Qiu Deshu, however, converted this practical and peripheral meanings of seals in Chinese tradition by letting them perform a main role in the painting. By doing so, Qiu created his unique abstract paintings.

Not only stylistically but also thematically, Qiu achieved his long-pursued ambition to express his individuality through painting, as shown in his most famous work, the “Fissuring Series” (裂变系列). This series is composed with flows of colors on the background and lots of white, red, blue, and yellow lines that suggest veins or cracks. The lines crisscross and repeat again and again, as if a web were hanging in front of the chaos of various colors.

According to the artist, the initial motif of this series was cracks on the ground. Qiu recalls that during the suppression caused by the Caocao exhibition, he felt his mentality was broken down just like the cracks in the ground, and to express his dismantled mental status, Qiu started to paint those cracks. That is, this series originated in the artist’s desire to express his own story.

In some paintings of this series, Qiu made an allusive figure with cracks. In “Fissuring: Spiritual Self Figure No.3” (裂变—大我精神形象 #3 illus. 27), for example, Qiu alluded to a human figure with a few strokes of dark black ink. The artist probably intended to suggest the artist’s body, as the title “Self Portrait” indicates. “Fissuring: Spiritual Self Portrait” (裂变—大我精神肖像) conjures up face images, again perhaps his. Through the white lines (cracks) on the greenish or brownish background (ground), Qiu expressed his wounded mind caused by the government’s suppression.

The process of producing the “Fissuring Series” is also saturated with Qiu Deshu’s torn-apart mentality. For this series, Qiu employed drawing, ripping, integrating, and mounting without any letup, inventing a kind of line-crack. On the back, he began tearing holes in the paper to create gaps—partially destroying his own ink painting to break through to a feeling of transcendence. He repeatedly re-assembled the paintings, only to tear them apart again. Qiu confessed that this process of tearing and re-assembling was a way to repair his dismantled mind.<sup>224</sup> To be specific, tearing papers provided a kind of cathartic experience to help him release his traumatic memories of the tragic, recent past. Re-assembling could have provided a chance for him to cure his broken mentality. By any measure, Qiu’s abstract ink painting functions as a personal psychological record. It is obvious that Qiu Deshu achieved his long-cherished desire for “independence of spirit, originality of style, and uniqueness of technique,” as written in the leaflet of the Caocao exhibition in 1980, through imbuing his personal stories in the works and conducting various technical experiments.

One thing to point out here is that Qiu Deshu did not exclusively stick to the nonfigurative. Rather, Qiu sometimes left referents in his paintings as shown in “Fissuring: Spiritual Self Portrait No.1” and “Fissuring: Spiritual Self Portrait No. 2” and often added imaginative figures, such as “Shanghai Miro” (上海米罗 illus. 28). That is, Qiu did not clearly separate abstract art from other types of paintings similar

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<sup>224</sup> *Turn to Abstract: Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985*, 145.

to other contemporary artists, such as Li Shan and Zhang Jianjun. Abstract art was rather one of the new arts that could most effectively realize his dream to establish his own styles and to deliver his personal stories.

In the “Fissuring Series” from 1985, Qiu eliminated all the evocative illusions of referents but concentrated instead on color cracks. Colors became much more diverse, and the patterns became much more complicated. Therapeutic method seems to have evaporated from the Series from this period. However, the style and technique of the work became the artist’s marks, even though the content of the work does not explicitly exhibit Qiu’s personal story. Qiu continues to paint with this technique today.

Qiu Deshu’s abstract art is the result of his continuous pursuit of individual expression. The reason why Qiu became so eager for individuality and uniqueness is perhaps because he had been so heavily engaged with the production of standardized and regulated art during the Mao regime. Qiu’s enthusiasm for revolution as a Red Guard turned to the absolute denial of its art and a strong desire for the new. That is, the political suppression of the artist’s personal expression by Mao and the early Deng period resulted in Qiu’s most remarkable abstract art, which is saturated with his personal story and unique technique. In this regard, Qiu’s abstract art is one of the manifestations of his dream of a new era, in which individual expressions are securely guaranteed.

### *Yu Youhan*

The most internationally well-known works of Yu Youhan are probably his

paintings of Mao Zedong with flowers of the 1990s, which were so-called “Political Pop.” But, before he launched the “Mao Series,” Yu was one of the pioneers of Shanghai abstract art who started painting abstract works as early as 1980 and continuously delved into abstract work throughout the 1980s.<sup>225</sup>

After his military service from 1961 to 1965, Yu Youhan entered the Ceramic Department of the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts (中央工艺美术学院) in Beijing, but due to the Cultural Revolution and personal illness, he had to pause his study many times and could not learn much at the school.<sup>226</sup> What he learned at school was introductory pottery making and pottery pattern designs. After finally graduating in January 1973 at the age of thirty, Yu Youhan was assigned to work at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute (上海市工艺美术学校).<sup>227</sup> During that time, he privately tried many different styles of European modern art that he saw in books, such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Expressionism, although he had to teach realistic paintings until the late 1970s. His various stylistic experiments were

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<sup>225</sup> Yu Youhan remembers that he started his own experiments in abstraction in 1979, but there are no remaining visual records of this lost work. The earliest that he could find was one produced in 1980.

<sup>226</sup> The Cultural Revolution started after Yu Youhan’s first year at school, after which there were no more classes. Instead, Yu Youhan and his classmates went to the countryside laboring in the morning and painting farmers and dogs in the afternoon as their drawing classes.

<sup>227</sup> Founded in 1962, the school’s classes stopped during the Cultural Revolution, but reopened when U.S. President Nixon visited in 1972. Yu Youhan guesses that the Communist Party leaders thought crafts art could provide souvenirs that foreign visitors would want to buy, such as silk scarves and embroidered dresses. The school is situated in Jia Ding 嘉定, forty kilometers away from Shanghai’s center. It offered eight majors, including craft arts, *guohua* (Chinese painting 国画) on fans and thermos, wooden sculpture, ivy sculpture, and folding screens.

possible perhaps because Yu was less bounded by the Soviet styles of oil painting since he had no formal education in painting at school and because he was exposed to Shanghai's relatively fruitful sources of many different foreign styles.

“A Portrait of Shen Fu” (illus. 29), painted in 1973, exemplifies Yu Youhan's most considerable achievement of the 1970s. What is interesting in this painting is that he painted the whole canvas in similar tones and colors: pale bluish, greenish, grayish, and pinkish pigments. Although the artist used black lines to indicate a girl's hair, eyebrows, eyes, nose and lips, the tones and colors are not very distinguishable between face, blouse, and background. Also, despite the direction of Yu's brushes that help to divide the body from the background or the hair from the background, regarding the colors and tones, this painting seems to be a flat colored surface with some black lines.

The fact that Yu Youhan painted similar colors and tones for the entire canvas demonstrates that he tended to treat the whole canvas as one entity. I surmise this concept was gained through Yu Youhan's obsessive study of Paul Cézanne. Yu confesses that he particularly liked Paul Cézanne and learned the “visual effect” from Cézanne, which means how to balance the whole canvas with colors and tones.<sup>228</sup> Yu Youhan's comment tells us that he rightly acknowledged Cézanne's works, even though he did not know much about European art history or theory at the time. Needless to say, one of Cézanne's biggest achievements was that he considered the

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<sup>228</sup> A conversation between Monica Dematte and Yu Youhan, “Studied Landscape: Yu Youhan's personal universe,” Shanghai, end of November, 2004. Shanghart Gallery, <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/texts/yuh8.htm> (accessed September 13, 2013).

entire part of a canvas equally. To Cézanne, all sections of canvas were equally important. The left lower corner, middle ground, right upper corner hold the same value. Cézanne thus used similar-sized touches to fill the whole canvas to balance it with colors and tones. As Yu Youhan studied Cézanne's paintings, Yu could have naturally learned to balance the entire sphere of a canvas as well as to regard the canvas as one. This lesson from Cézanne formed the basis for Yu Youhan's abstract works, especially helping him to escape from naturalism and begin to regard a canvas as a pictorial realm.<sup>229</sup>

After exploring many styles of paintings, Yu Youhan started his abstract art in 1980 and began his most remarkably abstract series, "Circle" (圆), in 1984. "Circle 1984-12" (illus. 30) exhibits typical aspects of his early "Circle Series." In this painting, a soft black circle is placed at the center and is large enough to occupy almost all of the canvas. Here, Yu Youhan made the surface of a circle very smooth, seemingly executed in black charcoal, although it is actually in acrylic. This big circle shape became a signature of the "Circle Series," which lasted until 1991. From 1985 on, Yu Youhan began to leave more visible brush touches on his canvases. In "Circle 1985-5" (illus. 31), for example, numerous small brushworks loosely form the shape of a big circle on the canvas. Yu Youhan's simple method, repeatedly leaving small strokes on the background to form a circle shape, was used for the entire "Circle Series" and became its trademark.

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<sup>229</sup> "Start from composition-Yu Youhan's work notes" [Cong goucheng kaishi-Yu Youhan Chuangzuo shouji 从构成开始-余友涵创作手记], in *Visual Art* [Shijue Yishu 视觉艺术] (Shanghai, 1987): 39.

The most important point of Yu Youhan's "Circle Series" is that no painting has any referential element. Each painting is composed only with short strokes that form a loose circle shape. Some works of the "Circle Series" look like finger prints or foot prints, but, as the artist himself noted, Yu's main concern was composition and color, not subject matter.<sup>230</sup> The title indicates nothing. It is just a combination of the word "circle," the year it was produced, and numbers that presumably imply the order of the piece in the whole series. Art critic Wu Liang argued for a formalistic methodology, saying that "his [Yu's] form was rich in its own meaning."<sup>231</sup> Wu Liang's comment was rightly interpreted by Wei Xia that the "meaning" indicated here very likely refers to the self-sufficiency of formal aesthetics.<sup>232</sup> That is to say, by expelling concrete objects and distilling suggestive meanings from the painting, Yu Youhan legitimized lines, colors, and the circle shape as existing as facts in themselves.

Yu Youhan's erasure of referents from his paintings coincide with his other abstract works in the early 1980s. Like "Circle Series," the titles of his earlier works, such as "Black and White number one" (黑与白 第一号) and "Abstraction 1983-6" (抽象 illus. 32), do not indicate any subject matter. Moreover, Yu Youhan's canvases

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<sup>230</sup> "Wisdom-creation and intuition of a picture" [Hui -huamiande chuanzao yu huamiande zhijue 慧-画面的创作与画面的直觉], *Visual Art* [Shijue Yishu 视觉艺术] (Shanghai, 1987): 37.

<sup>231</sup> Wu Liang 误亮, "Circle and Idol: About Yu Youhan" [Yuan he ousiang: Guanyu Yu Youhan 圆和偶像: 关于余友涵]. *Art World* [Yishu Shijie 艺术世界], (February, 1993): 30-31.

<sup>232</sup> Wei Xia, "Modern Art in Shanghai during the 1990s." (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1999), 36.

are composed with a few subtle colors and semi-transparent lines that do not suggest any concrete figures. They simply consist of slowly accumulated layers of colored lines.

Yu Youhan tells that his intention for these abstract paintings was to make something totally new, something dramatically different from the Soviet style that dominated the Chinese art world for several decades.<sup>233</sup> Considering that Mao's China overly emphasized believable figures and propagandistic stories, it is not surprising that Yu Youhan thought the most effective way to achieve his aim was to make works that have no recognizable figures and readable stories.

The fact that Yu Youhan was less bounded to academic art, the Soviet style of oil painting, is what possibly helped him to explore the new arena of abstract art. Yu Youhan recounted that Soviet-style painting education was very limited to a certain group of students, and he was not a beneficiary of that education. Rather, he was basically self-taught during his childhood and his army service from 1961 to 1965. Moreover, as previously mentioned, what Yu Youhan learned at the Ceramic Department of the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in Beijing was not meticulous drawing but pattern designs and pottery making. Being unable to get a formal fine art education was possibly a personal misfortune, but it ultimately helped Yu Youhan to create fresh and new abstract works in the 1980s.

At the same time, seeing other artists' abstract paintings inspired Yu Youhan,

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<sup>233</sup> Author interview with Yu Youhan, September 16, 2013, at Yu Youhan's studio in Shanghai.

both consciously and unconsciously, to experiment with abstract art. Yu Youhan saw American abstract works on his visit to the exhibition from the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Art in Shanghai in 1981, which was the first time he saw the original and mid-twentieth century American abstract works in person, although he had already knew the abstract works of Mondrian and Kandinsky from the books remaining in Shanghai from the Republican period.<sup>234</sup> Yu said that he did not understand the theoretical background or artists' intention of these works, but they were still impressive as new styles of art.<sup>235</sup> Yu Youhan also saw an abstract piece at the home of Miao Pengfei (缪鹏飞 b. 1936), his colleague at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute, and early Shanghai modernist artist Wu Dayu's abstract paintings, including "Early morning of Park" (公园的早晨), at an exhibition in the early 1980s (possibly at the Sixth National Art Exhibition in 1984). Yu Youhan did not emulate their abstract paintings, but they encouraged him not only to become more interested in abstract works that fit his interest in making his work deviate from the Soviet style but also to concentrate more on formal elements themselves rather than making stories with realistic figures.

Yu Youhan was very much concerned with formal qualities, but it does not necessarily mean that his abstract works are purely formalistic. In fact, they contain

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<sup>234</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Yu Youhan: Abstract, Concrete," *LEAP* 7 (March, 2011). LEAP, <http://leapleap.com/2011/03/youhan-abstract-concrete> (accessed June 5, 2013).

<sup>235</sup> Paul Gladston, "Yu Youhan," in *A Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversation with Seven Chinese Artists* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2011), 32.

heavy philosophical, historical, and cultural meanings, which are more apparent in the process rather than the result of painting.

In regards to the process of painting, Yu Youhan repeats numerous lines in various sizes to make the “Circle Series.” He hardly dashed off big and spontaneous brush strokes but calmly and slowly repeats the same gesture, sometimes drawing white lines on a black background and sometimes black short lines on white canvases. His motions are very small and gentle. He sometimes put some colors on the canvas, but all of them are very subtle. In the whole series of paintings, no element is disturbingly large or stridently loud.

The small strokes on each canvas vary continuously but subtly, making complicated patterns. As an example, in “Circle 1985-5” (illus. 31), the thickness, length, and transparency of each line is different. Their laid angles are diverse: in the middle of the canvas, small broken black lines are crossing horizontally and vertically, forming a vague cross pattern; besides the cross pattern, small black lines are vertically, diagonally, and horizontally laid down within the big circle. As a whole, the gentle variations of simple black lines create a labyrinth-like pattern.

Yu Youhan takes a very humble position as an artist to create work with such subtle variations. The whole image was completed as if every line is related to each other. As he drew one line, he added one line next to it, considering its relationship to the previous one, and repeated this process over and over. He often let pigments naturally flow downside. He made a rough structure for each work, but he was never able to or intended to plan the length and location of every line. Keeping his small and

quiet gestures, Yu Youhan respects the relationships that the lines make and allows changes that occurred naturally during the process of painting.

Yu Youhan's modest attitude shows that it was not the artist who ruled the process of painting and that the relationship between the artwork and the artist is not an object-subject relationship. Rather, the two are equally important and continuously communicate with each other.

As Yu Youhan himself tells us, his modest attitude was influenced by Laozi (老子)'s philosophy.<sup>236</sup> In fact, his method of painting looks after Laozi's teachings, especially Laozi's emphasis on human's harmony with other—sometimes even seemingly lifeless—things. According to Laozi's *Daodejing* [道德經], humans have no special place within the Dao, which is the source and ideal of all existence, being just one of its many manifestations. Laozi humbly regarded people as a part of a huge universe, not as a dominating ruler of it, and he intended to lead his students to return to their natural state, in harmony with the Dao. Similar to the humble position of a human in Laozi's theory, Yu Youhan's position in his painting is by no means dominating. He respected the universe of the whole canvas, limited his control in the process of painting, and tried to be a part of his work.

Besides Laozi's teaching, the reason why Yu Youhan tried to minimize his control over the painting was because of his thought that every kind of human's over-

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<sup>236</sup> Yu emphasized that he read Laozi's *Daodejing* [道德經] in the early 1980s, and it impressed him very much. Author interview with Yu Youhan, September 16, 2013, at Yu Youhan's studio in Shanghai.

controlling power is unnatural.<sup>237</sup> He was especially skeptical about politicians' severe control over art during the Cultural Revolution and recalled that he wanted more freedom in art production and tried to be less bounded to a norm and a standard as much as possible.<sup>238</sup> Thus, Yu chose abstract art, which was considered to be one of the newest and the freshest styles in 1980s China, and limited his control as much as possible.

As illustrated so far, formal elements are taken seriously in Yu Youhan's abstract paintings, but at the same time, they are fully saturated with Chinese philosophical meanings and the artist's dream of a less controlling society, which Yu calls natural. That is, with very basic elements of lines, subtle colors, and minimized gestures, Yu Youhan humbly and carefully realized his ideal world.

### *Ding Yi*

Born in Shanghai in 1962, Ding Yi started his career as an artist in a much milder cultural weather than the four other artists in my discussion, as the leader of the PRC changed from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping when Ding Yi started his career. This historical background allowed him be able to explore many styles and genres relatively easily. In the beginning of his study at Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute in 1980, Ding Yi was attracted to European modern art that he saw from foreign art

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<sup>237</sup> Author interview with Yu Youhan, September 16, 2013, at Yu Youhan's studio in Shanghai.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

books through various venues. At the school library, he was impressed by artworks in the twenty five serial books about European modern art, from Impressionism to Cubism. Also, his relative in Japan sent him three books of modern European painters: one was a monograph of Malevich and Pierre Bonnard, another was of Pissarro, Sisley, and Seurat, and the other one was about Maurice Utrillo and another Paris artist.<sup>239</sup>

Being impressed by the works of these European artists, Ding Yi tried to learn from their styles in the early 1980s. When he painted landscape, for example, Ding Yi employed several different styles. “Street in Sunshine” (充滿阳光的小街) is somewhere between naturalistic and Impressionistic cityscape; “Street with Red Houses” (紅房子街道) shows the influence of Maurice Utrillo; and “Sowing Farmers” (种植的农民) exhibits a Chagall-like dreaming landscape.

At the same time, Ding Yi studied abstract art. “Heroism” consists of a Mondrian-like progression eliminating illusionistic reality. “Untitled” (无题), “B84-2,” and “B84-4” are also nonrepresentational works composed with semi-transparent, colored planes, along with plenty of void space. They were painted in acrylic but look like water color paintings or Chinese ink and color paintings. “Continuous Area Series” (續界) more obviously reminds us of Chinese ink painting, particularly due to the usage of black color, vertical structure, and watery flow of pigments. This is perhaps because “Continuous Area Series” was made while Ding Yi was studying traditional

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<sup>239</sup> Interview with Ding Yi by the Asia Art Archive, November 26, 2008, as part of Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990. Asian Art Archive, [http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/dyftpreaap\\_201102171520444670.pdf](http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/dyftpreaap_201102171520444670.pdf) (accessed June 22, 2013).

art at Shanghai University. Significant elements of this series, namely repetition of strokes and division of canvas into sections, continued in the later abstract art series, which will be described below.

After spending several years on a stylistic exploration, Ding Yi finally dwelled in his geometric abstraction, inventing his most famous work, the “Cross Series” (十示) in the mid-1980s. The cross sign had, at its earliest, been revealed in his 1985 work “Abolishing Ancestral Rites” (破祭). The background stained with a wide spectrum of colors from creamy white, brown, gray, and black with wild black marks of ‘X’ became little bit more ordered in “Taboo” (禁忌 illus. 33), moving one step toward the “Cross Series.” A light gray canvas of “Taboo,” which is actually composed with multiple color ranges of dark gray, pink, black, brown, yellow and a little bit of red, provides a background for a square at the center. The square at the center is formed by many black broken lines—some are drier while some are oilier. Within this square, Ding Yi drew many ‘X’ marks with black, gray, and yellowish white strokes which were marked casually and placed randomly. The sizes of the marks vary, but they do not mathematically grow or dwindle. Colors, sizes, and shapes of the ‘X’ marks are executed as the artist likes. The casualty of this painting, however, becomes a “taboo” in Ding Yi after 1988, when he actually launched the “Cross Series.”

After 1988, Ding Yi started to embody meticulousness with all possible means. Instead of casual brush strokes, he used a ruler, masking tape, and draftsman’s

rendering pen to make painting as precise as possible. In “Appearance of Crosses 1” (illus. 34), for example, there is no more subtle gradation of colors, but the background is plainly painted and evenly divided into three parts. Ding Yi did not select colors for the background depending on the artist’s subjective taste or intuition, but adopted the predetermined primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. Instead of roughly executing the cross mark, Ding Yi placed the cross at the very center of each block. They are regularly repeated and aligned in order. The lines are not arbitrary anymore, yet they are exactly uniform. Ding Yi used this mechanical process until 1991, making the process of painting more a tedious labor than intuitive creation.

What Ding Yi was aiming for in this period was to make meaningless paintings lacking any cultural, historical, political, or personal connotations. He wanted his crosses to be plain, void, neutral marks. Unlike crosses with dense religious meaning (especially in countries that have been baptized in Christianity), Ding Yi’s crosses are simple structures that are borrowed from the “cross” pattern of the printing industry (“+” sign is the expedient used to register the four colors during printing). Ding Yi explains the reason for his reference of the industrial pattern was because he wanted to totally erase any cultural or historical context of crosses.<sup>240</sup> Artist’s touches are also missing, thus making the paintings seem to be mechanically printed out. In addition, by inscribing each of his cross paintings with only a serial number and the year of its execution, Ding Yi refuses to imply any story through titles.

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<sup>240</sup> Ding Yi. “Decipher Abstract.” Translated by Wang Jie. 2008. Shanghart Gallery, <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/1046> (accessed October 15, 2013).

Overall, each painting of his “Cross Series” is a plain combination of vertical and horizontal lines and plainly filled color planes, which are destined to forbid viewers to imagine any symbolic meaning beyond the surface.

In some ways, Ding Yi’s abstract work is similar to that of Yu Youhan. The major commonality is that both artists deliver no narrative by deleting any referents and endowing their works with non-symbolic titles. (They make titles by using the name of Series, produced year, and number.) Also, both of them employ very basic elements and repeat them, eventually making highly complex patterns. (Yu Youhan’s “Circle Series” consists only of short black strokes, while Ding Yi’s “Cross Series” uses only the cross or ‘+’ sign and basic colors.) These similarities are partially driven from their close teacher-student relationship at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute. Ding Yi respected Yu Youhan as his mentor, and they often held exhibitions together.

At the same time, however, Ding Yi’s work is also different from Yu Youhan’s. While viewers still can notice the artist’s presence in Yu Youhan’s works, mainly through feeling of artist’s gesture in brushstrokes, it is hard to find traces of the artist in Ding Yi’s “Cross Series,” as he is more dependent on mechanical appliances than his own hands. That is, if Yu Youhan adheres to a concept of a self-expressive artist, Ding Yi is quite released from this tradition.

In fact, Ding Yi’s elimination of meaning and eradication of the artist’s self distinguish him from the main stream of 1980s Chinese art, early twentieth century European abstract artists whom Ding Yi admired, and other Shanghai abstract artists. As Martina Koppel-Yang insightfully states, the main focus of the 1980s was a utopian

vision and a humanist attitude.<sup>241</sup> Reflecting this trend, many works in 1980s China were full of big thoughts and dreams for the new era. Unlike this grand call, Ding Yi's works suggest no optimistic or humanistic view.

At the same time, while early twentieth century European geometric abstract paintings, usually represented by works by Malevich and Mondrian, are the result of their search for the "Idea," Ding Yi's has no relation to the utopian dream.

Moreover, Ding Yi's works are different from other Shanghai abstract artists, such as Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Zhang Jianjun, and Qiu Deshu; Li Shan and Yu Youhan left individualistic strokes, Zhang Jianjun demonstrates a theme in which he is interested, and Qiu Deshu visualizes his personal traumatic experiences through his abstract paintings. They commonly expose their personal remarks, but Ding Yi totally abandoned delivering an idea or expressing his personal feelings. A utopian dream and the artist's idiomatic experience, two common attributes of abstract art, are totally absent in Ding Yi's paintings.

On this purely pictorial surface, Ding Yi attempts to play an optical game with viewers. To illustrate, "Appearance of Crosses 1989-4" (illus. 35) confuses the viewer's eyes by creating a spatial illusion. At first, this painting seems to be composed with the repetition of two sets of squares: one in pink, green, and white, and the other in light, gray, pink, and purple. Six pink sets locate in the middle, and ten purple squares surround them. The rest of the painting is covered with four full and

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<sup>241</sup> Martina Koppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989, a Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 23.

eighteen halves of pink sets. However, if the viewer's eyes follow the thick black lines, seemingly outlines of each set, these sets collapse, because of identical black lines crossing the center of each square. Those black lines initially make two sets of pink and purple squares, but the identical lines across them differently bind the small squares. There could be multiple sets of squares based on the way the center is defined. Also, thin light violet and black lines also confuse the viewer's eyes. In this way, the viewer's eyes wander from line to line, color to color, and square to square in the richness and dynamism of these mechanical-looking labyrinths. The plainly painted surface is, in fact, fully filled with rhythms of colors, lines, and planes, prohibiting the viewer's eyes from resting in peace. Such a mobile gaze produced by his paintings is reminiscent of traditional Chinese *shan-shui* painting, which requires viewers to move their eyes from the foreground to the middle ground, then again to the upper ground, in order to perceive the entire scenery.

In this sense, Ding Yi's paintings set up a different perceptual relationship between the viewer and the artwork than that proposed by the work of Mondrian or Stella, whom Ding Yi particularly liked. Except for Mondrian's later pieces, "Boogie-Woogie," works of Mondrian and Stella are generally perceptible at once, as there is not much movement within the canvas. In front of their canvases, viewer's eyes can be fixed at a certain point and perceive the whole work at once. If a viewer is the subject who recognizes the artwork, an artwork is the object that is appreciated. This subject-object relationship is broken down in Ding Yi's abstraction, because both viewers and works are subjects who actively play an optical game with each other. Regarding such

differences, Paul Gladston rightly points out that, while the paintings of Mondrian and Stella make the viewer strongly aware of his or her subjectivity versus the painting, an object, Ding Yi's paintings suggest an "immersive relationship" between the viewer and the work.<sup>242</sup> Tony Godfrey also correctly notes that Ding Yi's paintings move into our space, and viewers respond physically.<sup>243</sup>

Another noteworthy aspect is that Ding Yi's geometric abstract works slip through a dichotomy of fine art and industrial design. Apparently, his canvas with patterns resembles textile design, specifically Shanghai patch work. "Appearance of Crosses 1989-7" (illus. 36), for instance, reminds viewers of patterns on a bed sheet or a table cloth. This is the result of Ding Yi's continuous attempt to break the boundary between art and design. In his article, "Decipher Abstract," Ding says that he frequently researches the painting technique that is on the edge to weaken painting elements, which drives him onto the verge between the art area and everyday life.<sup>244</sup> This "on the edge" quality is possibly due to his education at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute, his experiences working in factories, and his belief in the vitality of art that is nurtured when it is fused with another area.<sup>245</sup> Ding Yi intentionally embraces the realm of design, mass production, folk art, all of which Clement Greenberg, who

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<sup>242</sup> Paul Gladston, "A conversation with Ding Yi," *Contemporary Art in Shanghai Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2011), 56.

<sup>243</sup> Tony Godfrey, "Ding Yi and the Impossibility of Abstraction," *Ding Yi* (Shanghai: Minsheng art museum, 2011), 24.

<sup>244</sup> Ding Yi, "Decipher Abstract."

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

championed American abstract painting, feared the most.

Likewise, Ding Yi's early phase of abstract art was created through a process of citing every possible source; it has the characteristics of traditional art, Western geometric abstraction, contemporary Shanghai artists, and industrial design. However, Ding Yi refused to be limited by any of these constraints. Through partially accepting and partially negating each of them, Ding Yi successfully invented his unique geometric abstract painting.

Ding Yi exhibited his abstract paintings at the *Youth Art Grand Exhibition* (青年美术大展) in 1986 at the Shanghai Artists Gallery (上海美术家画廊). That exhibition was organized by recommendations of the Artists' Gallery and the Youth Art Association (青年艺术联合会), which were all under the Communist Party.<sup>246</sup> Indeed, Ding Yi's abstract piece gained the third prize at the exhibition. He also submitted his *Cross Series for Exhibition of Today's Art* (今日美术展) at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1988 with abstract works by Zhang Jianjun, Li Shan, and Yu Youhan. If compared to the regulations on exhibiting abstract works in the early 1980s, it is noticeable that the cultural weather had significantly warmed up by the late 1980s.

Enjoying the mild cultural weather and the rich artistic foundation of Shanghai, Ding Yi succeeded in creating his signature abstract work, the "Cross Series." As a passionate, young artist, he openly referenced European and American modern art, traditional Chinese paintings, and even industrial designs for his work, but

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<sup>246</sup> The Youth Art Association is under the Communist Youth Group (Gongqingtuan, 共青团).

he created his own style by smartly refusing to be totally limited by them. At the same time, distinguished from the older generation, Ding Yi's "Cross Series" shows a lack of desire to overly express either himself or a grand, optimistic idea. Although the pursuit of the new inherent in Ding Yi's abstract works is shared with other four abstract artists in my discussion, such a new aspect of Ding Yi's abstraction obviously signals the new phase of Shanghai abstract art.

## CONCLUSION

### Multiple Versions of Abstract Art

In conventional art history, abstract art has been defined as new art that rejects the Renaissance's tradition of illusionism, and, thus, expels any discernible image from artworks. For its history, it is commonly told that abstract art had begun in early twentieth-century Europe within a new intellectual paradigm, moved its center to New York City during World War I, climaxed during the 1950s and 1960s, and declined after the 1970s. This study has attempted to counter this canonized explanation of abstract art with its singular definition and linear historiography, both of which are highly Euro-America-centric, by taking a hitherto neglected subject, 1980s Shanghai abstract art, as a case study. My ultimate aim was to reveal the diversity of abstract art and to expand our understanding of it by illustrating the unique political, conceptual, local, and visual aspects of abstract art in 1980s Shanghai.

Abstract art became old-fashioned by the 1980s in Europe and North America, but it was definitely new art to most Chinese artists, and its discussion and production had just (re)started in the People's Republic of China (PRC) during that time. This temporal gap was caused by China's unique political situation and the embedded ideological meaning assigned to abstract art in the PRC. Respecting Stalinist socialist art theory, Mao Zedong's Communist Party harshly criticized abstract art as useless art that brings no benefit to a socialist country and, thus, abstract art was severely restricted. Even during the 1980s, when fervent discussions about abstract art were

ignited, the main issue became whether or not the China of the new era needed to legitimize abstract art. On the one hand, a conservative faction still considered that abstract art brought no benefit to socialist China, adhering to the art policy of Mao Zedong. On the other hand, a relatively liberal circle thought the Party should not prohibit abstract art, respecting freedom in art production. In the 1980s PRC, whether or not to allow abstract art was not a simple issue in the art field; it symbolized the level of adherence to Mao Zedong's thought and China's identity as a socialist country.

Despite fluctuations in the official policy on abstract art, it was gradually admitted toward the end of the 1980s, as Chinese society became relatively liberal and the value of artistic freedom, along with social, economic, and political democracy, was more pursued. Considering such a unique local history, one can hardly denigrate abstract art in 1980s China to be belated when compared to that of the early and mid-twentieth-century Europe and North America.

For the conceptual aspect of abstract art, the 1980s Chinese art circle constantly tried to understand abstract art within the context of their local culture, such as literati paintings, Chinese characters, and calligraphy. Although Chinese art critics and artists did not arrive at one single definition, many articles about abstract art published in the 1980s considered abstract art as extracting common and essential attributes among different objects and usually differentiated abstract art from abstractionism, which indicated only Euro-American abstract art with no discernible image.

This fact implies that the meaning of abstract art in 1980s China is not

congruent with its institutional explanation. Chinese abstract art in the 1980s certainly symbolized the new, the innovative, and the radical, just as early twentieth-century Euro-American abstract art did, but it was by no means the entire rejection of its tradition. What 1980s Chinese abstract art refused was only China's recent art, namely Mao's uniform, propagandistic, and figurative art. Based on the existing tendency toward abstraction in Chinese traditional arts, namely prioritizing expression over illusionism, the 1980s Chinese art circle instead understood abstract art as freely modifying the appearance of objects and sometimes leaving more or less visible referents in an artwork. That is, the fundamental meanings of abstract art in 1980s China are different from its conventional explanation.

Abstract art was discussed at a national level in 1980s China, and it was produced in several cities, but Shanghai was certainly its center. Tracing Shanghai's special history of abstract art back to the Republican period, I argued that abstract art began to spread its roots in the Shanghai of the early twentieth century. European abstract artworks were known to at least a select few Shanghai artists, and Shanghai modernist artists' abandonment of realism and narrative laid the most essential foundations for 1980s Shanghai abstract art. Blessed by the mild cultural weather after Mao's death in 1976 and the city's culturally abundant background, Shanghai artists of the younger generation could launch vigorous experiments with abstract art. The fact that Shanghai's unique history allowed abstract art to flourish implies that more region-specific study is required. Each locale must have its unique story; thus, more studies of abstract works in other times and places, as well as comparative studies,

should be conducted to reveal the varieties of abstract art.

I also conducted careful visual analysis on abstract works by five Shanghai artists, namely Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Qiu Deshu, Yu Youhan, and Ding Yi. Their works exhibit the great level of variety. In terms of media, Li Shan, Yu Youhan, and Ding Yi usually used acrylic and oil; Zhang Jianjun experimented with mixed media; and Qiu Deshu mostly applied ink and seals on paper. Subject matters are also diverse. Li Shan and Qiu Deshu's focus was on expressing individuality; Zhang Jianjun's interest was in the eternal existence against time; and Yu Youhan and Ding Yi concentrated relatively more on formal elements.

Despite such diversity, I found two noticeable commonalities among them. Most importantly, abstract art commonly meant the manifestation of their dream of a new society that allows artistic freedom, individuality, and diversity. All of the five artists experienced the severe governmental regulation of the arts, directly or indirectly, and they wanted to break out of the uniform, propagandistic artworks of Mao's era. As a solution, they chose abstract art, which is the most remote style from Mao's art with readable stories and recognizable figures.

Another commonality is the fact that these Shanghai artists aggressively employed their local art to their abstract works—whether depending on local media (ink and paper used in the works of Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, and Qiu Deshu), or imbuing Chinese philosophy to artworks (Laozi's theory in Yu Youhan's works), or using Chinese characters (Zhang Jianjun and Qiu Deshu), or adopting traditional artistic methods (sympathizing with nature in Qiu Deshu's works and shifting

viewpoints in Ding Yi's paintings). That is, unlike early twentieth-century European abstract artists who rejected their long artistic tradition, 1980s Shanghai abstract artists embraced their local art and created their version of abstract art.

All in all, 1980s Shanghai abstract art holds distinctive meanings that were constructed from its own history and culture. This very fact proves that 1980s Shanghai abstract art does not fit in the definition and history of abstract art in institutional art history and, further, urges us to expand the Eurocentric, singular, and linear explanation of abstract art.

I want to conclude my discussion with a brief illustration of the changes in the five Shanghai abstract artists' works in the differentiated background of the 1990s. This is an attempt to strengthen my argument by showing that the meanings and values of abstract art become noticeably different according to changes in its context, even within the same locale.

The socially and culturally frozen situation after the Tiananmen Square massacre gradually warmed up during the 1990s, and the PRC faced another drastic change. China was becoming increasingly engaged with the global world, and it made one of the most dramatic economic developments in world history by aptly reforming its policies in every sphere of society. In the art realm, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still controlled art, yet less visibly, and artistic freedom noticeably increased. Simultaneously, commercialism replaced political ideology as the dominant position in the art field, resulting in the creation of many galleries, with Shanghai as one of the top cities where the most foreign galleries had opened their business. In this changed

circumstance, numerous artists across the nation started to aggressively explore more up-to-date artworks and to actively participate in the international art world.

As the art world entered into a new phase, Shanghai abstract art also began to exhibit significant changes from the past. As artists who concentrated on abstraction started to experiment with more diverse styles, media, and subjects than ever before, and as different cities began to nurture more abundant art production, it is no longer appropriate to call Shanghai the center of abstract art in China.

Apparently, the artworks of the five artists in this study more or less dramatically changed. As the social atmosphere changed in 1989, Li Shan stopped making abstract paintings. He chose to abandon abstract art and started to concentrate on figurative paintings. Owing not only to the critical situations that suppressed people's optimistic hope in the Chinese government but also to the information he had recently acquired about British and American Pop art, Li Shan began reviewing China's (and his) past and appropriating Mao's images on his canvas with bright colors, which he named the "Rouge Series."

Like Li Shan, Yu Youhan started to make Pop-style paintings using images of Mao Zedong with flowers. Many reasons can account for this change from abstraction to the Pop style. First is the chaotic social situation at the end of the 1980s. Even before the Tiananmen Square tragedy, the tension in society was soaring. The level of crime, the number of layoffs, bankruptcies and reports of bribery peaked in 1988.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 227-229.

Against this backdrop, Yu Youhan felt that his abstract paintings were only reaching a small group of people—a kind of bourgeoisie living in an ivory tower and having no good impact on the society.<sup>248</sup> Also, by the late 1980s, Yu thought that eight years of abstraction was long enough, and it was time to change his style. In the process of changing his work toward a more society-participating type, he saw a booklet on Pop Art that had been published in the “West” that was inspired specifically by Andy Warhol and Richard Hamilton. After a few years of overlapping periods of abstraction and Pop, Yu Youhan paused from making abstract art in 1991.

Zhang Jianjun went to New York City right after the Tiananmen Square incident. He started to explore installation and video-recorded performances more frequently than mixed media abstract works, but his main theme, time and eternal being, has continued through the present.

Qiu Deshu and Ding Yi show seemingly the least change in their artworks. They remained in Shanghai and kept making abstract works. Qiu Deshu repeatedly adds to his “Fissuring Series.” However, his colors became much more vibrant with much more complicated patterns. Today, the series seems to have become his signature technique and style with fewer therapeutic meanings.

Ding Yi is also continuing his “Cross Series.” Its appearance is similar to the works from the 1980s, but Ding Yi has abandoned meticulousness and employs

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<sup>248</sup> Paul Gladston, “Yu Youhan,” 29.

casualness by using his free hands.<sup>249</sup> Also, reflecting the increased commercialism of 1990s China, Ding Yi puts his cross patterns on many commercial products.

Interestingly, however, the products are quite traditional, such as fans and folding screens. Since the 2000s, Ding Yi has made sculpture and neon signs of the “Cross Series.”

There are many more layers to these new aspects of the five artists to study, of course, but for now, I would like to leave them for the next project and emphasize one fact: their stylistic change in the 1990s is another indicator that shows the abstract art of a certain time and place was one specific version that was formulated by a unique historical and sociopolitical background.

The meanings and histories of abstract art are diverse, depending on each locale’s different historical and cultural settings, as well as changes in social and political situations. Both 1980s Shanghai abstract art and its changes during the 1990s hint at the multiple versions of abstract art in different locations at different times. Many cities, such as Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, Mexico City, Brasilia, Buenos Aires, Sydney, Budapest, and others, must have created their own abstract works with heterogeneous meanings and values at different times, and more light must be shed on each of them. Only with more studies on these “peripheries” of abstract art can we

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<sup>249</sup> Up until 1991, Ding continued painting his cross works with the assistance of rulers and masking tape. But around 1991, he gradually emancipated his colors from strict adherence to meticulousness. Moreover, he sometimes painted on corrugated paper to achieve different textural effects and started to use different materials than his pre-1991 work. Most of his earlier cross paintings employed acrylic on treated canvases, but very soon he changed his method by applying acrylic directly to raw canvases and started to combine charcoal and acrylic on raw linen, and chalk.

decanonize its Eurocentric explanation and rewrite the diverse historiographies of abstract art, and by extension, modern art.

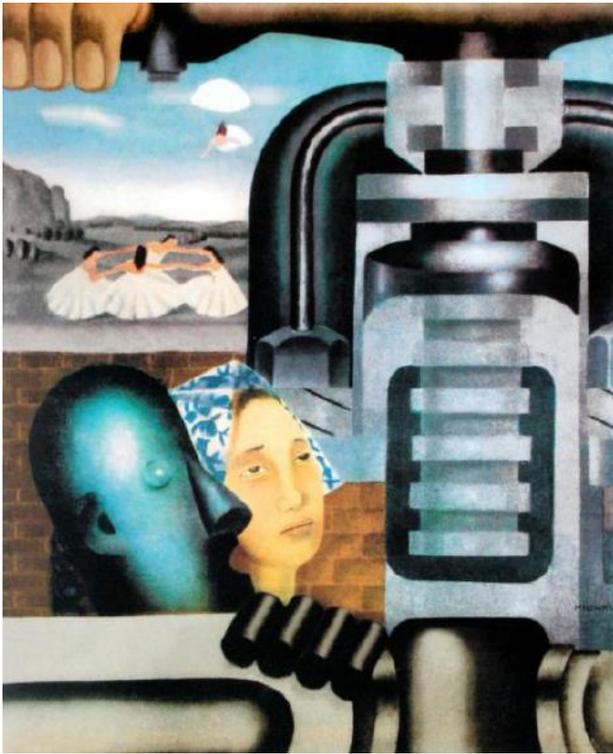
APPENDIX



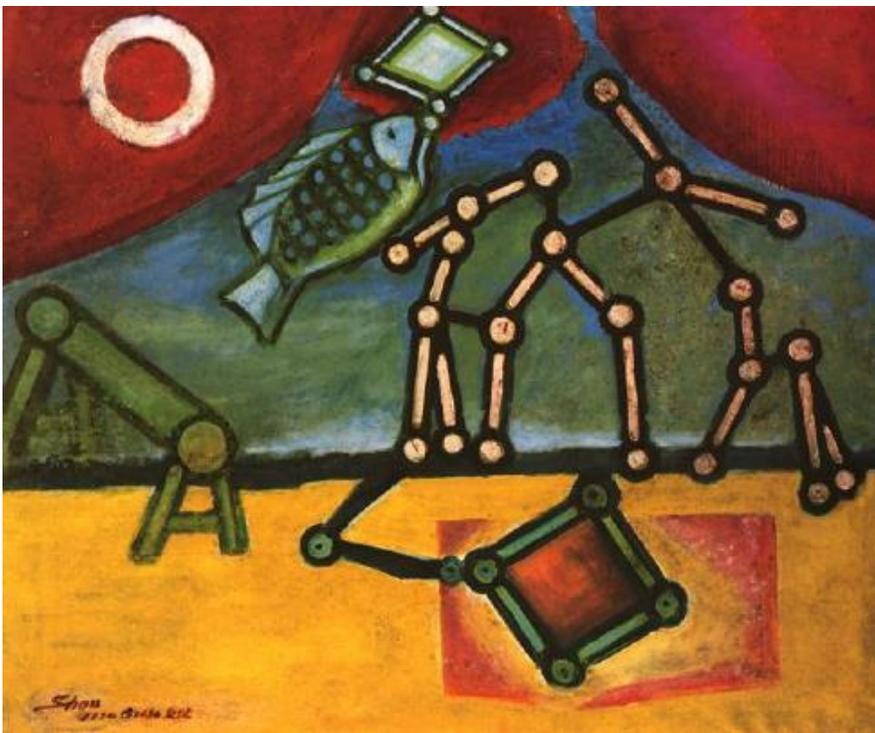
1. Liu Haisu, "Female Nude" oil on canvas, 50.3 x 100 cm, 1931.



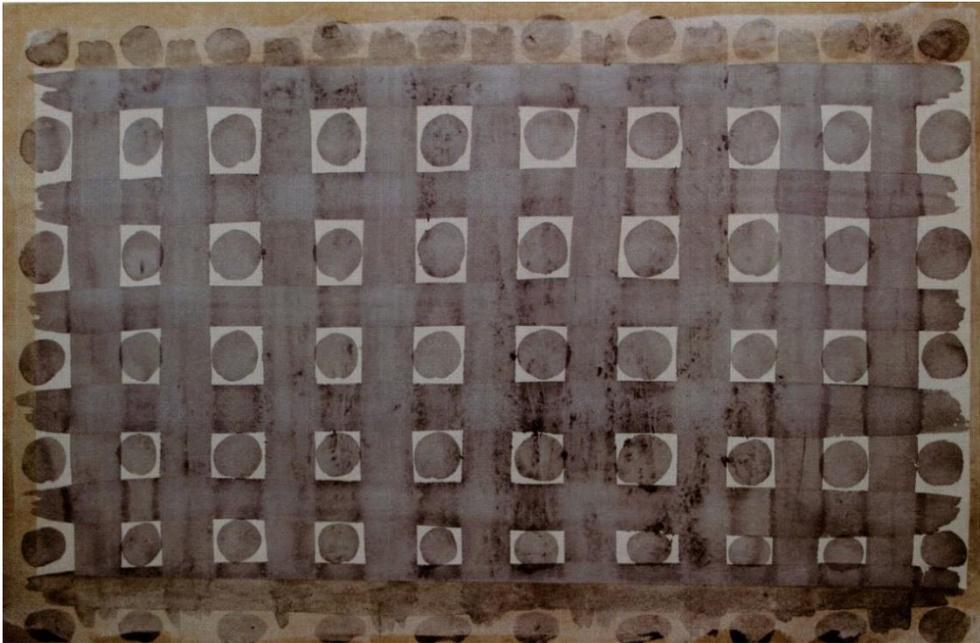
2. Guan Liang, "After a Bath" oil on canvas, 66 x 53 cm, 1934.



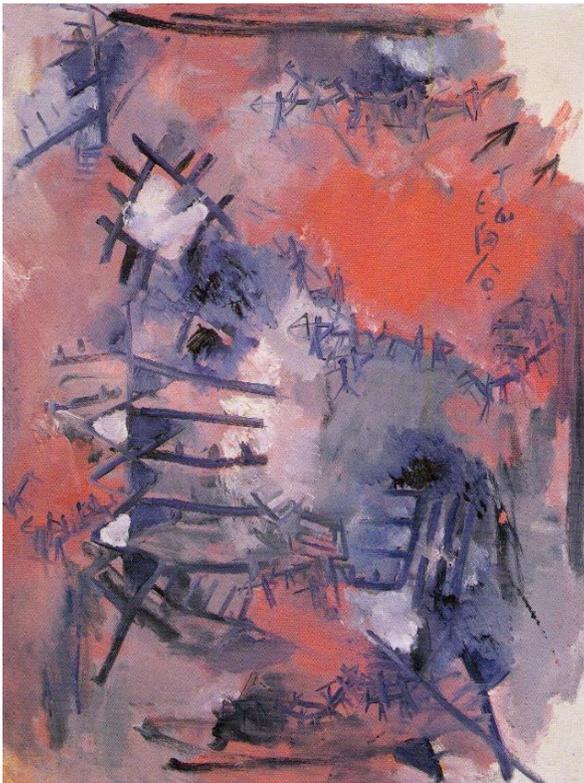
3. Pang Xunqin, "Composition" oil on canvas, 1934.



4. Zhao Shou, "Let's Jump" oil on canvas, 78 x 93 cm, 1934.



5. Li Shan, "Order" ink, paper, wood panel, 74 x 50.5 cm, 1979.



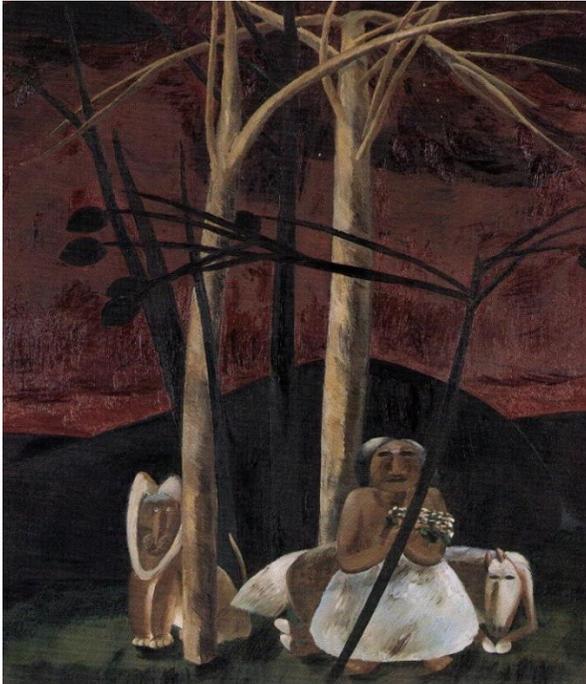
6. Li Shan, "Origins-Hemudu Culture 1" oil on canvas, 121 x 92 cm, 1980.



7. Li Shan, "Extension 2" oil on canvas, 81 x 142 cm, 1985.



8. Li Shan, "Origins- Home Town" oil on canvas, 59 x 61.5 cm, 1978.



9. Li Shan, "Origins- Harmony 1" oil on canvas, 150 x 130 cm, 1984.



10. Li Shan, "Origins-Rhythmic Signs" oil on canvas, 81.5 x 61 cm, unknown.



11. Li Shan, "The Origin 5" oil on canvas, 85 x 120 cm, 1982.



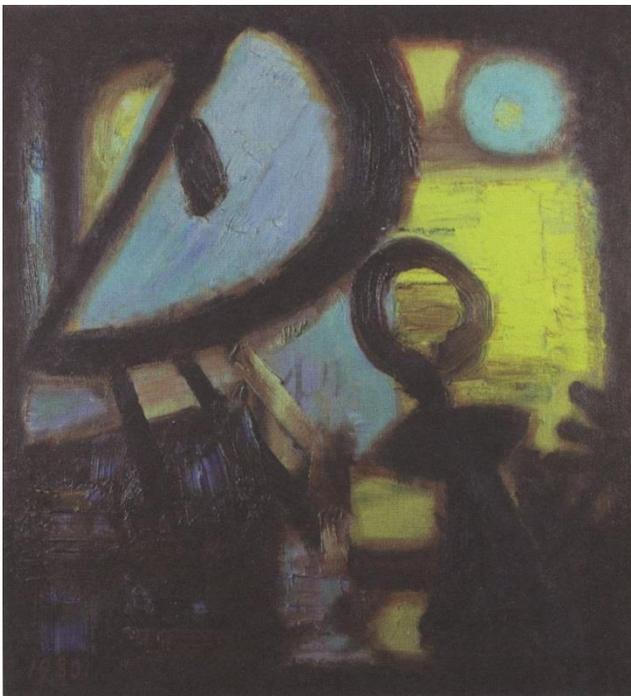
12. Li Shan, "Still Life" oil on canvas, 54.5 x 40 cm, 1981.



13. Li Shan, "Young Girl" oil on canvas, 64 x 50 cm, 1982.



14. Zhang Jianjun, "Trees, Pond, and a Bird" oil on canvas, 61 x 67 cm, 1980.



15. Zhang Jianjun, "Moon, Sun, and a Human of Yin Xu Age" oil on canvas, 52 x 48 cm, 1980.



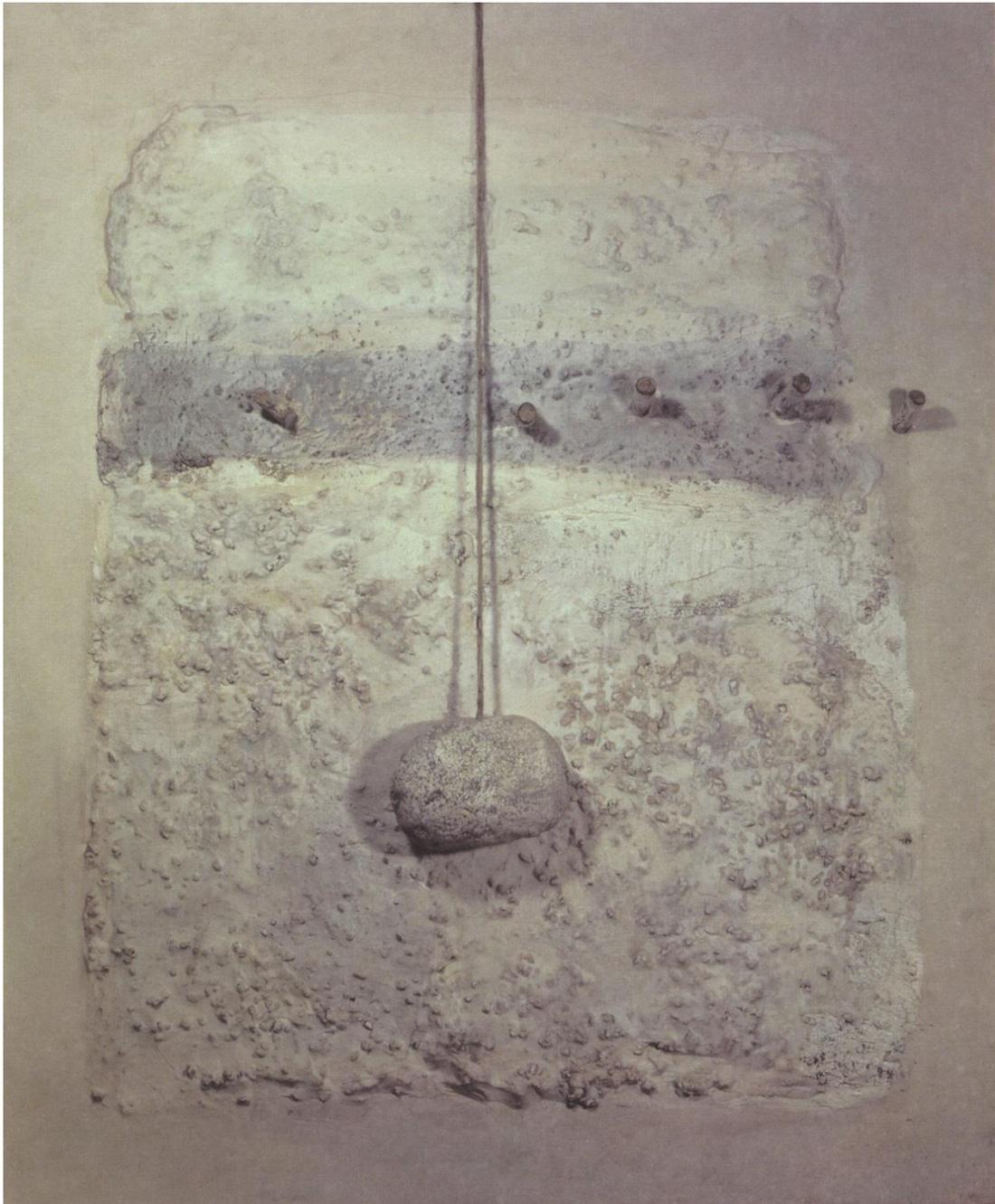
16. Zhang Jianjun, "Pathetique" oil on canvas, 140 x 105 cm, 1979.



17. Zhang Jianjun, "Eternal Dialogue" mixed media, 67 x 92 cm, 1982.



18. Zhang Jianjun, "Noumenon No. 59" mixed media, 158 x 145 x 3 cm, 1984.



19. Zhang Jianjun, "Noumenon No. 70" mixed media, 120 x 100 x 8 cm, 1984.



20. Zhang Jianjun, "Human Beings with Their Clock No. 1" oil paint on linen, 229 x 340 cm, 1986.



21. Zhang Jianjun, "Nature Series" Chinese ink on Xuan paper, 175 x 288 cm, 1987.



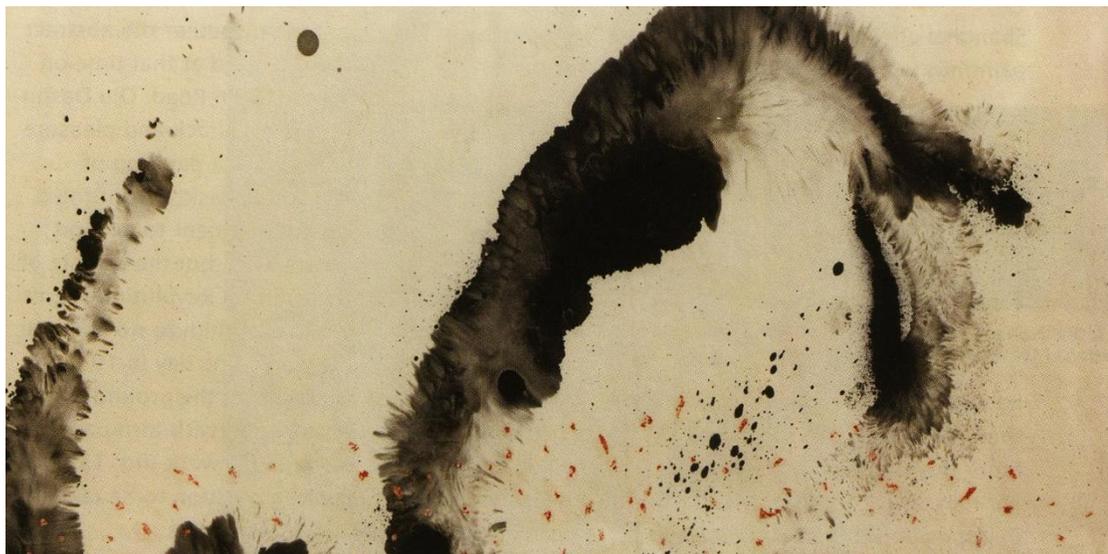
22. Qiu Deshu, “Song at the Crest of the Wave” ink on rice paper, (clockwise, each) 26.5 x 34 cm, 27 x 34.5 cm, 25.5 x 34 cm, 26 x 34 cm, 1973.



23. Qiu Deshu, “Abstract Space” ink and seal on rice paper, 110 x 65cm, 1979.



24. Qiu Deshu, "Rhythm of Stream" ink and color on rice paper, 58 x 68.5 cm, 1979.



25. Qiu Deshu, "Empty No. 1" ink on paper, 77.5 x 129.5 cm, 1982.



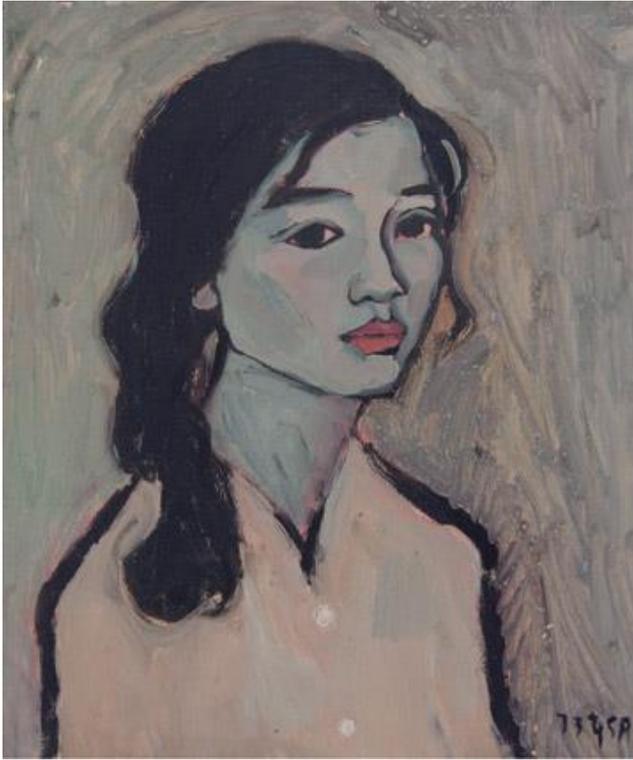
26. Qiu Deshu, "Days and Nights" ink and seal on paper, 77 x 132 cm, 1980.



27. Qiu Deshu, "Fissuring: Spiritual Self Figure No.3" ink and seal on rice paper, 134 x 68 cm, 1983.



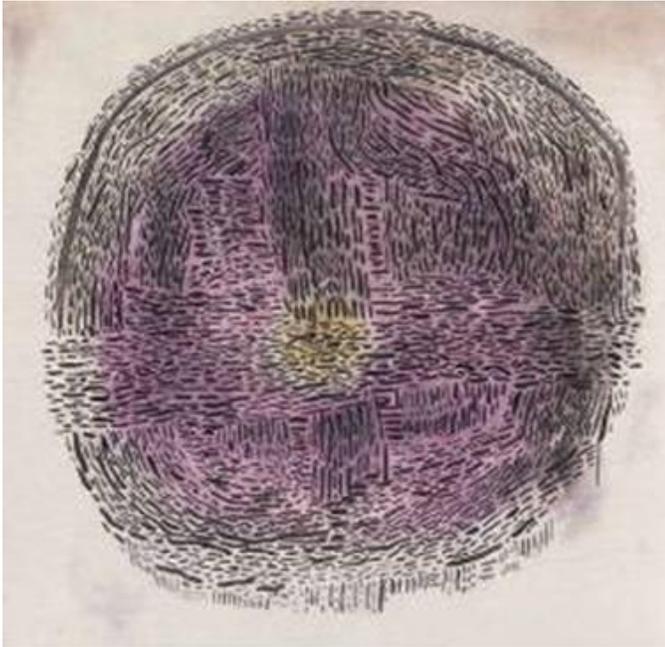
28. Qiu Deshu, "Shanghai Miro" color ink on rice paper, 180 x 48 cm, 1980.



29. Yu Youhan, "Portrait of Shen Fu" oil on paper, 40 x 44 cm, 1973.



30. Yu Youhan, "Circle 1984-12" acrylic on canvas, 125 x 110 cm, 1984.



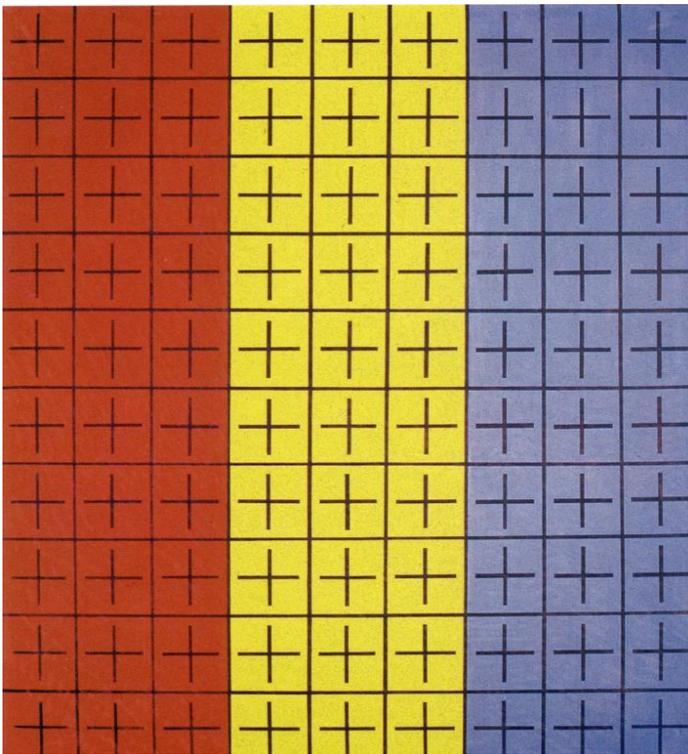
31. Yu Youhan, "Circle 1985-5" acrylic on canvas, 160 x 130 cm, 1985.



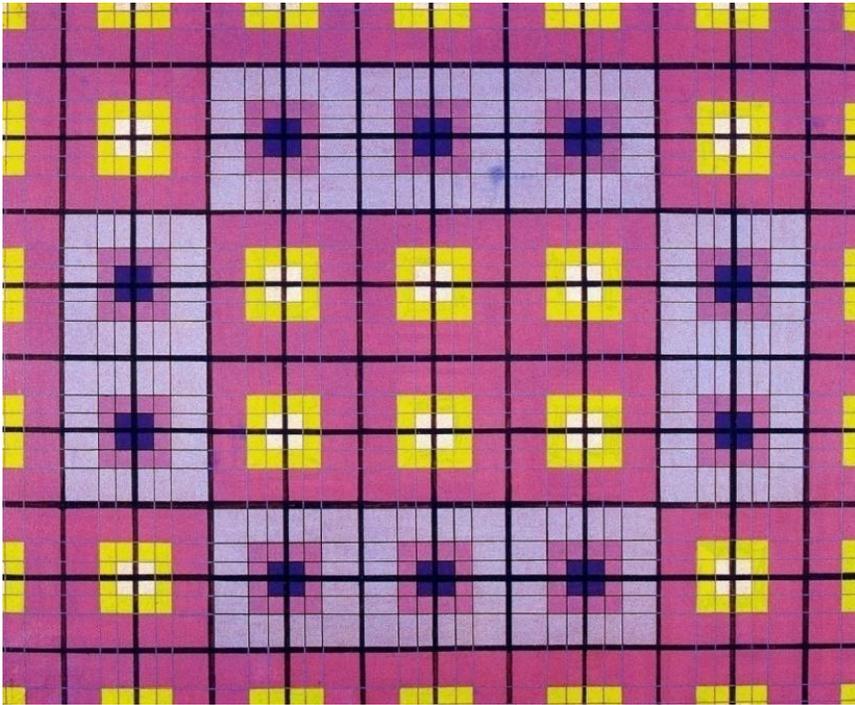
32. Yu Youhan, "Abstraction 1983-6" acrylic on paper, 108 x 79 cm, 1983.



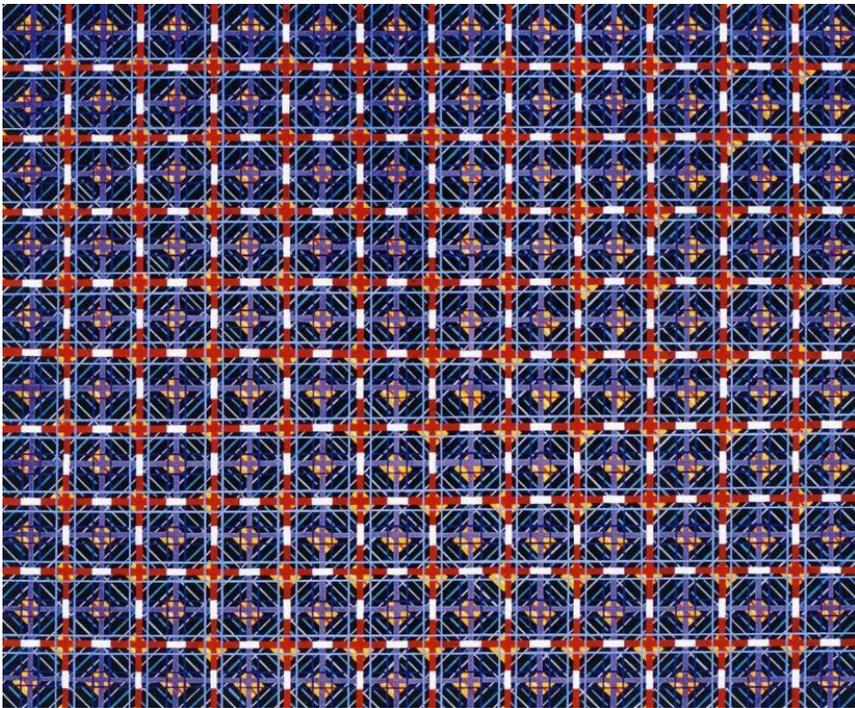
33. Ding Yi, "Taboo" oil on canvas, 84 x 84 cm, 1986.



34. Ding Yi, "Appearance of Crosses 1" acrylic on canvas, 200 x 180 cm, 1988.



35. Ding Yi, "Appearance of Crosses 1989-4" acrylic on canvas, 50 x 60 cm, 1989.



36. Ding Yi, "Appearance of Crosses 1989-7" acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120 cm, 1989.

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