Semiotic Warfare
A Semiotic Analysis of the Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979 - 1989
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THE SUBJECT OF THIS STUDY

The subject of this book is the visual arts of the Chinese avant-garde of the period from 1979 to 1989. Avant-garde (qianwei) here denotes those artistic trends that attempted to overcome political and social norms and that, in many respects, are innovative. This avant-garde is not an underground movement. Different trends, artists and artists’ groups that act mainly in a semi-official space constitute the movement. “Avant-garde” is also the name with which Chinese critics and artists label the artistic trends of the 1980s, as evident in the title of the exhibition China/Avant-Garde (Zhongguo qianwei yishu zhan) held in the National Gallery in Beijing in February 1989. The Chinese term qianwei is not totally congruent with the Western word “avant-garde”; it only to a lesser degree connotes the tradition of the Western avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, a large proportion of the artists, mainly in the mid-1980s, looked back to the Western avant-garde of the beginning of the 20th century, to Surrealism and Dada, and to their renaissance in the 1950s, to Neo-Dada and Fluxus. Chinese art critics and artists of the 1980s make no clear distinction between the terms “avant-garde” (qianwei), “modern” (xian dai), and “contemporary” (dang dai). They often use them as synonyms, which is also evident in the official title of above-mentioned exhibition, Modern Chinese Art Exhibition (Zhongguo xian dai yishu zhan). In this book I also use the term “contemporary” to designate in particular the artistic trends since the mid-1980s. Contemporary here is used in the sense of going beyond the tradition of Western modern art. The 1980s avant-garde movement in the field of the visual arts is not an isolated phenomenon. Parallels can be found in the literature, music and cinema of the time. I will mention similarities where significant, however to go in more detail would exceed the scope of this book.

The period covered here is the decade of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, beginning with the changes in the political course instigated by the confirmation of Deng’s reforms at the Third Plenary Session of the XI Central Committee in December 1978, and ending with the seizure of power by conservative forces after the Tiananmen Massacre in June 1989. This period is coherent not only politically, but also from an art historical point of view. Chinese art historians rightly consider the year 1979 as the starting point of a modern and contemporary Chinese art. The first changes in the institutional structure of the official art scene were carried out in late 1978 and early 1979 and the first alternative semi-official and non-official exhibitions, like the often-mentioned Exhibition of the Stars (Xingxing meizhan) were organized then. Further, in painting, new subjects and styles appeared. In late 1983 and throughout 1984 the campaign against Spiritual Pollution (jingshen wuran) hindered the development of contemporary Chinese art. For a short period, conservative forces gained power. The Sixth National Art Exhibition (Diliu jie quanguo meizhan) in 1984 thus was a great
disappointment for artists and art critics. I take this caesura into account through a subdivision into the periods of 1979 to 1984 and of 1985 to 1989, the most active and creative period of the New Wave. The China/Avant-Garde exhibition in 1989 was the summit and the finale of the New Wave, also called ‘85 Movement (bawu yishu yundong). Indeed, after the show and after the tragic events of June 1989 the art scene drastically changed on a thematic as well as on a structural level. Desperation and disillusion replaced the optimistic tenor of the artistic movement of the 1980s, a movement with a strong interest in ontological questions and formal and conceptual artistic explorations that was motivated by the utopian quest to build a modern Chinese culture. Instead a cynical attitude prevailed after June 4, 1989. Moreover, the emergence of an inner Chinese art market and an international market for Chinese contemporary art changed the structure of the Chinese art scene.

In the 1980s, as in the era of the Chinese Republic, the political and social transition imposed a redefinition of the Chinese cultural identity. At the beginning of the 20th century the intellectuals’ self-appointed task was the creation of the culture of a nation both Chinese and, at the same time, modern. At the end of the 1970s, marked by the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution, and being without an ideological and spiritual leader, artists and intellectuals considered it necessary to make a kind of self-introspection (fanxing), to question recent history and its impact on society, culture and the individual. With the experience of this recent past, facing the opening to the West and the Party’s program of modernization, the primary task again was to redefine the nature of a modern Chinese culture. In accordance with Deng Xiaoping’s slogans “Let 100 flowers bloom” (bathua qifang) and “Liberate your thinking” (jiefang sixiang) the artists proposed different positions in their works of art, thus enhancing and contributing to the discussions on a theoretical level. Subjects of the Chinese cultural debate of the 1920s and 1930s like eclecticism and assimilation, modernism and realism, and the value of tradition, were once again of interest. Like their predecessors - the intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement (Wusi yundong) - the artists thought of themselves as representatives of a cultural movement of enlightenment (qineng yundong). Spurred by the official economic and political reform projects, the main forces in the development of new concepts were a utopian and visionary euphoria and a humanist attitude. This so-called humanist enthusiasm (renwen qing) characterized the cultural debates from the late 1970s to the late 1980s.

Indeed, it was the rethinking of the recent past and a revision of its ideological foundation - Marxism Maoism - that had initiated the question of humanism. The re-reading of the Frankfurt School interpretation of Marx’s Economic-Philosophical Writings 1844 opened up an influential discussion about the subject of alienation (yihua) in 1981. The concept of a socialist alienation provided a basis for the theoretical critique of the Cultural Revolution and the official ideology. Further, it raised the notion of the individual, and through the reception of Sartre also the aspect
of voluntarism and subjectivity. The theoreticians of the alienation theory, like Wang Ruoshui or Zhou Yang, cautious not to transgress too far into forbidden ideological domains, did not pick out subjectivity as a means of emancipation as a central theme. In the arts, however, in literature, cinema, music and the visual arts, the quest for a subjective and authentic representation of reality is marking the beginning of an alternative art. The revaluation of the recent past in Scar art (Shangheng yishu) is carried out from the perspective of personal experience, as evident in Cheng Conglin’s The Show on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 (1968 nian X yue X ri xue; 1979; fig. 18). Subjective perception is the standard for the reflection of reality in the paintings of the new realism (xin xieshi zhuyi) like Luo Zhongli’s Father (Fuqin; 1979; fig. 29). The protest march of the group Stars (xingsang) was a direct expression of the quest for individual and artistic freedom. Painter Feng Guodong voiced the quest for self-expression (zhiao biaoxian) as a basic principle of artistic creation in 1980. His oil painting People at Ease (Zizai; 1980; fig. 2) and Sartre - He Is Himself (Sate - ta shi ta zi ji; 1980; fig. 3) by Zhong Ming, a work that has been published very often, are typical examples. Related to self-expression is the quest for the beauty of form (xingshi mei), which had been propagated by Wu Guanzhong in 1979. Wu’s semi-abstract inks and oil paintings or Yuan Yunsheng’s Water Splashing Festival (Poshuijie; 1979; fig. 42) are representative of this trend.

The campaigns against bourgeois liberalism (zichan jioji ziyouhua) in 1981 and against Spiritual Pollution in 1983 and 1984 slowed down the development of contemporary art; they did not however, make it disappear. The graduates of the fine arts academies of the years 1982/83 energetically and with new concepts initiated the New Wave Art ‘85 Movement (bawu xinciao meishu yundong) as art critic Gao Minglu called it. The so-called conceptual innovation (guannian gengxin), a slogan formulated at the Huangshan Symposium in April 1985, was nurtured by the reception of Western and Chinese philosophy, Western literature and art theory. Common trends like the Root-searching school (xun gen pai) or the methodology fever (fangfalun ren) also became significant factors in the field of the visual arts. Now the notion of humanism was equated with not only the search for the freedom of individual expression, but also with the establishment of a new spiritual order. Thus in the middle of the 1980s two influential trends emerged: the Current of Life, or Elan Vital (shengming zhi liu) and the Rational Painting (lixing huahua).

The advocates of the so-called Elan Vital trend, influenced by Bergson’s philosophy, were searching to establish an integral ethical order. They therefore aimed at pondering the subjective and intuitive forces of the individual, which they believed suppressed through the growing rationalization of the modern society. They questioned rationality as a base of tradition and modernity, and thus close to the Root-searching school. This kind of search for the original and the natural is evident in paintings like Mao Xuhui’s Bodies in a Concrete Room (Shuinfang lide renli; 1986; fig. 4) or in Zhang Xiaogang’s triptych Incessant Flourishing (Shengsheng buxi; 1988; fig. 5). For to be established in the strict sense of critical rather in the traditional sense (bi’an shi, overcome Western methods and Shu Qi the most)

Both trends culminated in the cultural a (xiandai) Committee order negation of the notion of socialism and utopian cultural c.

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fig. 5) For the adherents of the Rational Painting, however, a new spiritual order had to be established based on rationality. Here, the rational should not be read in the strict sense of the philosophical term. The artists did not relate to it in the more sense of critical reason or as the opposite of intuition, feeling and the unconscious, but rather in the sense of a spiritual quality of an absolute spirit and of a spiritual world (bi’an shijie). The rational should provide an intellectual framework and a method to overcome the old cultural and aesthetic formulae as well as a simple adoption of the Western modernism. The Northern Art Group (Bei fang yishu qun) with Wang Guangyi and Shu Quan, or the Pool Society (Chi she) with Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi and others are the most important representatives of this trend (figs. 73, 77).

Both trends, irrational and rational, attempted to redefine the notion of a Chinese cultural and aesthetic modernity, and to relocate a Chinese modern consciousness (xiandai yishi), a term originally coined on the Third Plenary Session of the XI Central Committee in December 1978. However, the artists’ utopian quest to build a new order negatively related to or based on rationality as well as their mythicisation of the notion of modernity closely relates them to the official project of a rationality-based socialist utopia. It is the challenging coexistence of the artists’ and intellectuals’ utopian concepts with the official ideology of modernization, which dominates the cultural climate of the 1980s.

The cultural euphoria of the early and middle 1980s finally lost its vigor. Economical setbacks and the inflation that started in 1987/88, as well as the political quarrels that found an outlet in another campaign against bourgeois liberalism in 1987, brought about a change of atmosphere. Artists and intellectuals once more became aware that they would not be able to exert any considerable influence on the country’s modernization. Su Xiaokang’s and Yuan Zhiming’s television film series River Elegy (Heshang), which generated a far-reaching controversy in 1988, can be considered one of the last manifestations of the cultural euphoria of the 1980s. Trends that were concerned with a deconstruction of the modern mythologies since the middle of the 1980s now became more and more prominent. At the Huangshan Symposium in November 1988, the artist Wang Guangyi put forth the slogan “Liquidate humanist enthusiasm” (qinli renwen reqing), with which he questioned the up-to-then dominant modernist stance of the art scene. His series of oil paintings Black Reason (Heise lixing; 1987) and Red Reason (Hongse lixing; 1987; fig. 71), as well as his Mao Zedong - Black Grid (Mao Zedong - heige; 1988; fig. 68) and Mao Zedong - Red Grid (Mao Zedong - hongge; 1988; fig. 76) reveal that humanist enthusiasm is just another mythology. However, in the mid-1980s the reception of structuralism, post-structuralism, Dada and Neo-Dada, as well as the rediscovery of Chan and Daoism had already made Huang Yongping and the group Xiamen Dada, as well as artists, who experimented with Chinese characters (for example Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan and Xu Bing), interested in a deconstruction of institutional and normative structures and systems. (figs. 79, 83, 88) They replaced the redundancy of the signs of the official art
and propaganda, as well as what Wang Guangyi called the “excess of meaning” (yi yi fanlan) of the art of the New Wave, with semantic emptiness of the signs. Chance and chaos replace subjectivity and a rational or an irrational order as creative principles; an ironic attitude replaces patriotic pathos. Huang Yongping’s object “History of Chinese Painting” and “Concise History of Modern Painting” Washed for Two Minutes in a Washing Machine, December 1, 1987, (Zhihougu huihua shi ke “Xiaodi huihua jianshi” zai xiyi jiaole liang fenzhong 1987.12.1), or Wu Shanzhuan’s installation “Red Humor - Red Characters (Hongse youmu - chi zi, 1987)” and his 70% RED 25% BLACK 5% WHITE (70% hongse 25% baise 5% heise, 1986) are typical. (Figs. 63, 83) The projects and works of these experimentally and conceptually working artists are part of the controversies concerning a Chinese post-modernity, which began to draw attention around 1986. These works deal with artistic and aesthetic questions; their highly political questioning of normative value systems was, however, a challenge for the official side. Official art critiques considered those works nihilist inventions. The cynical attitude that replaced the cultural euphoria is evident in the works of the artists’ group Pool Society (fig. 8), Zhang Peili’s series of oil paintings, Swimmers, (Youyouzhe, 1985/86; fig. 6) and his series X? (X? xilie, 1986/87; fig. 77), or again Gong Jianyi’s series Haircut, (Li xilie, 1985; fig. 7) and his Second Situation, (Di’er zuangfu, 1987/88; fig. 78) show the kind of critical humor, which the artists coined gray humor (huaiyouyoumu) and which, after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, turned into the acid cynicism of the Cynical Realism and the Political Pop.

The exhibition China / Avant-Garde, conceived by Gao Minglu as a retrospective of the artistic trends of the 1980s was the last event of the art of the New Wave. The Pistol Shot Event (Qiangji shijian) one of the many performances shown in this exhibition, not only was the most spectacular event, but also the most sensible reaction to the tense political climate of spring 1989. Artists Xiao Lu and her boyfriend Tang Song, both children of high-ranking cadres, fired two pistol shots at Xiao Lu’s installation Dialogue (Duihu; figs. 92, 93). Many considered the performance a prease of the events of the democratic spring of 1989. Even if one does not agree with this kind of consideration, one has to admit that the performance is an excellent example of the embodiment of art in intellectual discourse and political movement, typical of the 1980s.

As John Clark states, “Japan will always be a member of the basic comparative set of variations in understanding modern Asian art because it has the longest and to date by far the most visibly documented series of modern artworks in Asia.” Nevertheless, for several reasons Japan will not appear as a constant of comparison in this book. First, the influence of Japanese art and culture on the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s was primarily an indirect one, not to compare with the role of Japan for the Chinese art of the early 20th century. A wide range of documents on modern and contemporary Japanese and Western art published in Japan, comprising catalogues, monographs and magazines, such as Bijutsu Techo, had been accessible to the art students in the academ Japanese language, as it from Western language Japan thus functioned; artists, the majority of avant-garde, were princ American art. Second, Chinese ink painting an ink painting, probably played only a marginal role in the debate concerning “Dangdai zhongguoshu” considered a model for the direct Japanese influence to tangential phenomene philosophy and literatu Suzuki and Fromm to Yukio’s novels as stim These influences where:

[1] For the exhibition, see also ZIGNS.
[8] For the Chinese post-modernism
[9] See chapter 2.5.
students in the academies' libraries. The students welcomed the publications in Japanese language, as they could more easily guess the meaning from the Kanji than from Western language texts in Western publications. Nevertheless, even though Japan thus functioned as a source of information for the Chinese art students and artists, the majority of the students, including the later participants of the Chinese avant-garde, were principally interested in modern and contemporary European and American art. Second, a more direct influence can be observed in the domains of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy or in design. Modern Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, probably being the most directly inspired by Japanese calligraphy, again played only a marginal role within the avant-garde movement. In addition, as evident in the debate concerning the modernization of Chinese painting, which had been initiated by Li Xiaoshan's article "My Opinion on Contemporary Chinese Painting" ("Dangdai zhongguohua zhi wojian"), Japanese ink painting and calligraphy was not considered a model for the development of contemporary Chinese ink painting. Third, a direct Japanese influence on the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s was restricted to tangential phenomena. And again, these influences came from the domains of philosophy and literature. Examples include the contribution of the writings of D.T. Suzuki and Fromm to the rediscovery of Chan Buddhism, and the impact of Mishima Yukio's novels as stimulants to the imagination of the young artists. I will mention these influences where relevant.

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[1] For the exhibition, see also ZGHSB 1985.22 (December 21, 1985).
[4] The controversy of alienation integrated in many cases the reception and the critique of Sartre and his existentialist humanism.
[5] The voluntarist aspects of Sartre's philosophy, the emphasizing of subjective and individual forces, were as Wang Jing mentions, the base of "the excessive content of the thesis for socialist alienation". See Wang Jing (1996a): p. 11.
[9] See chapter 2.5
2.6 THE ARTISTIC IDENTITY: CONTROVERSIES

During the 1980s, the pluralization of styles catalyzed a number of controversies and far-reaching discussions in the fields of art theory and art criticism. In the context of increasingly innovative artistic practice, the monolithic role of socialist realist art theory became obsolete. Contrary to the dictum that in socialist countries art first is realized on paper, art theory now had to catch up with artistic practice. Pluralism did not loosen the close relationship between artistic practice and theory, which was a premise of the art of the People’s Republic. On the contrary, the relationship between the work of art and text was intensified. The hierarchical relationship - the text’s primacy over the work of art - was, however, replaced by a dialectical relationship. Artists discussed recent works and new concepts in art magazines, and the official art criticism responded extensively. Many artists considered the theoretical and critical incorporation of new concepts a driving force for the modernization of Chinese art and a platform for the positioning of China’s contemporary art. As in the May Fourth Movement, theoretical discussions sought to define Chinese cultural identity, for the official side, as that of a socialist and modern Chinese culture. The concept of what modern Chinese art and culture should be was defined from three angles: first, in relation to socialist art and culture; second, in relation to traditional Chinese culture; and third, in relation to Western culture, which had gained increasing influence since the opening of the country.

The official guiding principle for the modern national culture was modern consciousness (xiandai yishi), a concept formulated at the Third Plenary Session of the XI Central Committee in 1978, and adapted by the art world in the early 1980s. Many contemporary artists shared a utopian attitude and joined in the search for a Chinese modernity and the quest for a new man. Thus, modern consciousness, a concept that at the beginning of the 1980s merely designated a self-reflective consciousness and reform consciousness (i.e., change and progress) gained more significations, such as subjective consciousness, self-consciousness, and research into the unconscious. Symposia aimed at redefining the notion were organized throughout 1985 and 1986, and articles in art magazines discussed the significance of the modern consciousness for the ‘85 Movement under headings like “The Modern Consciousness and the Visual Arts” (“Xiandai yishi yu yishu”). New concepts that transgressed the official understanding of the modern consciousness were categorized as non-modern (fei xiandai). The root-searching tendency with its backward-looking perspective, as well as subjective, absurd, pessimistic and nihilistic tendencies belong to this category. The official side related these tendencies to the stigmatized notion modernity (xiandai pai), which meant the Western modernity.

REALISM

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A keyword often used in such controversies is the notion, authentic (zhenshi). While at the end of the 1970s the official side requested an "authentic representation of historical figures and an authentic reflection of reality", in the mid-1980s they asked for an "authentic modern consciousness". For the young artists the modern consciousness was based on the so-called humanist enthusiasm (renwen renqing) that aimed for the emancipation of the alienated individual. Their utopian and humanist attitude situated artists close to the official program of modernization with its ideological re-orientation. The official discussion about socialist alienation and a humanist Marxism, about a Chinese modernity situated between socialism, tradition and Westernization, and the old question of the autochthonous and assimilation, constitute the framework of the various controversies of the 1980s.

The main topics discussed since the late 1970s are realism, including the authentic representation of historical figures and the authentic reflection of reality; the question of form and content, including the discussions about the beauty of form and the beauty of the abstract; self-expression with the attendant problem of the subjectivity of artistic creation; as well as: the function and nature of art, the nationalization of oil painting, the methodology of art theory, innovation in artistic training, the development of traditional Chinese painting, postmodernism in China, autochthonous elements and the assimilation of Western influences, the liquidation of humanist enthusiasm, and nude painting. While a detailed description and analysis of all these topics would go beyond the scope of this book, I shall discuss the more important controversies below.¹⁶²

REALISM

The first far-reaching controversy after the Cultural Revolution was of course that concerning realism. The rehabilitation of Wang Shikuo's monumental drawing Bloody Clothes (1959) in 1977, in addition to new works such as Chen Yifei's and Wei Jingshan's The Taking of the Presidential Palace (1977) signaled the reformation of the official style.¹⁶³ New means of overcoming the artistic principles of the socialist realism of the 1970s were found. Factors initiating and nurturing the controversy concerning the reformation of realism include the return to the loose brush of the revolutionary romanticism of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the non-glorifying and non-stylizing representation of historical figures in the paintings of Scar art, and the interest both in the meticulous representation of material qualities and in the authentic reflection of real life, characterizing the new realism developed by the Sichuan Painting School. The magazine Art created a special column entitled "Discussions on the Problem of Realism". Here, the question of how the innovation of realism should work was discussed predominantly in terms of developing an adequate understanding of it, of
its importance for artistic creation and its historical significance. In all discussions, the notion of the “authentic reflection of reality” (zhenshi di fanying xianshi) took a key position. The socialist realist theory of reflection requires a mode of representing reality in accord with the socialist Weltanschauung. Thus, the reflection of reality is to be made on a higher, universal (and therefore more typical) plane, resulting in the stylization of the representation. Ultimately, the appearance of reality is to express the intrinsic qualities of things; that is the socialist ideals. An authentic representation of reality therefore follows concrete aesthetic principles, which are: lofty, big, total (gao, da, quan). Works of art that reflect reality without positive stylization, for example Scar art and new realism, in opposition to those representing positive qualities, were described as small, bitter, old (xiao, ku, jiu). The socialist understanding of realism, put forth by Shao Yangde and others, considered realism not only a model for artistic creation, but also a kind of Weltanschauung. A moderate position, in between the orthodox socialist understanding and its progressive interpretation, was represented by Hu Dezh and Qian Haiyuan. For them, even works not painted in a realist style could show a realist spirit (xianshi zhuyi jingshen), a notion formulated by Hu Dezh. The progressive interpretation considered realism a historical style and a model of creation. Realism thus lost its monolithic position as the sole and only mode of creation. Shao Dazhen, Li Xianting, Mao Shilai and others promoted pluralism of styles. Their position that the feelings of the artist play as important a role in the creative process as social factors, coincides with the concepts of the subjective, or objective representation of reality. This position also opposed the official understanding of art history as a dialectical fight between realism and non-realist trends, which they considered an obstacle in the realization of the Hundred Flowers campaign. The orthodox, dialectical approach is evident in the title of the controversy “Realism and Modernity” (xianshi zhuyi yu xiandai pai), or also “Realism and Modernism” (xianshi zhuyi yu xiandai zhuyi). However, the progressive position mentions realism alongside modernity and modernism, too. But the latter here is described as a subsequent development of Chinese art, which is in accordance with social progress.

THE BEAUTY OF FORM

The controversy about the beauty of form, focusing on the beauty of the abstract, was extensive. One third of all articles published from 1979 to 1985 touch on the subject. It was the publishing of a new edition of Mao’s Letters on Poetry in 1978, in which he admitted the positive role of image thinking (xingxiang siwei) for artistic creation that signaled it was time to reconsider the question of form and content. Wu Guanzhong’s article “On the Beauty of Form in Painting” (“Huihua de xingshi mei”), published in Art in May 1979, then launched the controversy. Here, and in his follow-up articles of the years 1980 and 1981 he described the beauty of form as the central point of artistic creation, equal in importance to the reflection of reality. Quite
significance. In all discussions, "shu shi" took a role in the reflection of reality is typically plane, resulting in the
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The controversy about the beauty of form is related to the question of the beauty of the abstract (chao xiang mei). The official position, represented by Hong Yiran and Yang Chengyi, considers the abstract as incompatible with the principles of aesthetics, as the beautiful always is concrete. Advocates of abstraction tried to substantiate their position historically, citing arguments drawn from the aesthetics of traditional Chinese painting. Li Xianting and others divided the history of Chinese painting into three stages, moving from abstraction (Yangshao culture to Han Dynasty) to the concrete (Jin to Song Dynasty), and back again to abstraction (Yuan, Ming, Qing and recent history). In his articles, the painter Yuan Yunsheng designated the line as the main element of connection between abstraction and Chinese tradition. He described the calligraphic line, taken as an autonomous element, as the most typical Eastern/Chinese, formal element - an element that simultaneously is the main structural element in Western abstraction. He further claimed that contemporary Chinese artists should dare to promote artistic innovation through the reception of their own tradition, as Western modernity was strongly inspired by the Eastern line. Yuan's wall painting "Water Splashing Festival" (fig. 42), with its tendency to formalism and abstraction, clearly illustrates his position.\footnote{125}

Wu's and Yuan's quest for the beauty of form and the beauty of the abstract touches on another aspect of the reflection theory. For them and others, artistic creation is not guided by a prescribed content, but the artist as individual is the central factor in the process of creation. The work of art therefore no longer is the expression of the people (biaoxian renmin), but is rather the expression of the self (ziwo biaoxian).
EXPRESSION OF THE SELF

Another extensive controversy of the first half of the 1980s focused on the notion of expression of the self. Central points of the controversy were the concept of subjectivity as well as the question of the nature and the function of art. Qu LeiLei, painter and member of the Stars, brought up the idea of expression of the self in 1980: "I think, the nature of art is the expression of the inner self of the painter. He is to paint the feeling of joy and pain." The expression of the self was also mentioned in the foreword to the second exhibition of the Stars in August 1980, and the group therefore is considered a forerunner in this field. The often-cited passage of the foreword reads: "The world is getting smaller every day. Man has left his footsteps everywhere. No new continent is discovered. Today, our new continent is ourselves." The reaction of the conservative faction was immediate. The same month, Qian He published his article "The Expression of the Self Should Not Be Considered the Nature of Painting" ("Ziwo biaoqian bu ying shiwei huahua de benzhi") in Art. There, Qian described the expression of the self as inconsistent with the aesthetic habits of the masses and as opposed to the dynamic of the theory of reflection, since the concept refutes the objective reflection of reality. It thus contradicted the nature and the function of socialist art, which consequently would lead to the adoption of Western modernity. Ye Lang and Yang Chengyin exposed the conservative position from the perspective of the aesthetics of socialist realism. They went even so far as to stigmatize the notion as an existentialist slogan.

Indeed, the expression of the self is part of the discussion on socialist alienation and touches on the concepts of subjectivity and voluntarism, concepts that the official theorists of the alienation theory, for example Wang Ruoshui, avoided cautiously. Painters Feng Guodong and Zhong Ming, members of the Oil Painting Research Association and spokesmen for the self-expression trend, considered the expression of the self to reflect upon the significance of individual existence. They proclaimed the right of the autonomy of the self for the revaluation of man. In the Chinese secondary literature, Feng Guodong’s People at Ease and Zhong Ming’s
focused on the notion were the concept of action of art. Xu LeiLei, one of the self in 1980: "I, the painter. He is to paint also mentioned in the 1980, and the group "ren-cited passage of day. Man has left his way, our new continent

evaporative faction was Qian He published his book "Self Should Not Be nting" ("Ziwo biaoxian zhi") in Art.176 There, ssion of the self as ic habits of the masses unique of the theory of refutes the objective contradicted the nature so, which consequently f Western modernity. gyin exposed the perspective of the n. They went even so m as an existentialist

The biggest controversy of the 1980s certainly was that about the future of Chinese ink painting. It was initiated by Li Xiaoshan's article "My Opinion On Contemporary Chinese Painting" ("Dangdai zhongguohua zhi wo jian"), published in the July 1985 issue of Jiangsu Pictorial, and it preoccupied the art scene through to the end of the 1980s.177 Li's article, reedited and published in Fine Arts In China the same year under the provocative title "Chinese Painting Already Reached a Dead End" ("Zhongguohua yi dao le qiong tu mori de shihou") triggered a flood of more than 300 predominantly critical articles. Many of those articles cited the title of the article's first edition. In response the Jiangsu Pictorial created the column "My Opinion on Chinese Painting"("Zhongguohua zhi wo jian"), and in 1990, the Jiangsu Arts Publishing House published a collection of most of the articles published on the subject.178

In his article, Li Xiaoshan looks at Chinese painting from two angles. First, he describes its characteristics and outlines its situation in the 1980s. Second, he gives a critical account of the most important painters. Li's main argument is that Chinese painting, according to its long feudal history, was a hermetic system. Furthermore, it reached the final stage of its development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with painters such as Ren Bonian, Wu Changshuo and Huang Binhong. Having reached an end-stage of development, it was therefore "situated at a turning point between peril and new beginning, between destruction and construction."179 Li described the history of Chinese painting as a process of perfection of techniques and formal elements, which was, however, related to the steady diminution of artistic and aesthetic concepts. The apex of its technical perfection therefore led to a sheer and rigid formalism.

Chinese painting theory had adapted to this situation and become focused on
painting practice rather than on theoretical concepts. To achieve better results, Chinese painting theory was to be fundamentally overhauled, conceptual innovation necessitating the rejection of traditional formal principles. In later articles, Li substantiated his arguments theoretically.\textsuperscript{183}

According to Gao Minglu, other contemporary critics, and a few painters of the older generation, the significance of Li Xiaoshan’s articles lies not in his theoretical concepts, lacking as they do a scientific foundation, but rather in the fact that the provocative and focused formulation of his arguments opened up the rigid situation of Chinese painting and initiated a discussion.\textsuperscript{184} The controversy catalyzed by Li’s article is next to the experimental ink painting of young painters like Gu Wenda, Ren Jian, Yang Jiechang, Wang Chuan, and others who revolted against the rigid formalism of Chinese painting— one of the few excursions of the field of Chinese painting into the scene of contemporary Chinese art. In 1987 the appearance of the so-called New Literati Painting (Xin wenren hua) initiated another controversy that was, however, exploited by the official side to propagate national values. The official side designated Huang Quyuan, a lesser painter of the older generation, the epitome of Chinese painting.\textsuperscript{185}

**OTHER CONTROVERSIES OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE 1980S**

Typifying the second half of the 1980s is a pluralism of styles. The flood of concepts and trends initiated debates both small and large, too numerous to cover here individually. Conservative voices totally rejected the art of the New Wave in statements such as Jin Ye’s article “On Xiamen Dada and Other Things” (“Guanyu Xiamen Dada yu qita”) and Yang Chengyin’s “Program of the Art of the New Wave” (“Xinchao meishu ganglin”).\textsuperscript{186}

As I mentioned above, the main subjects touched on in all controversies and debates is the modern consciousness and the definition of a Chinese modernity. Two trends in particular comment directly on these subjects with their works and their writings. They are the Rational Painting with its quest for a new spiritual order based on metaphysical qualities, and the Elan Vital, an anti-rational trend aiming to construct an integral ethical order through the liberation of human instincts.\textsuperscript{187} Both, being impregnated by a utopian and humanist attitude, seek the construction of a modern society with new ethical and cultural values. In particular the notion of the rational, as well as Rational Painting with its quest to overcome self-expression and other models of artistic creation, became the focus of an extensive controversy. Its significance for the development of modern Chinese art was discussed in detail by Gao Minglu.\textsuperscript{188}

Another influ trend of Western traditional art is condemned by some artists with trends in the field considered instead.

In the mid-1980s, a number of artists, including Dai Hua and Wu Shu, engaged in a series of discussions regarding the concept of “Western painting.” They argued that the term “Western” should not be used to describe painting styles, but rather to describe the origins of the artists, who were of Western descent. This led to a number of debates and discussions about the definition of “Western” and the role of European art in Chinese culture.

In the late 1980s, the concept of “post-modernism” began to gain popularity in China, and it was argued that the modernist movement in Chinese art was a result of post-modernism. This led to a number of discussions about the relationship between modernism and post-modernism, and the role of modernism in Chinese art.

As for the development of modern Chinese art, it was argued that it was influenced by both Western and Eastern traditions. It was also argued that the development of modern Chinese art was a result of the interaction between these traditions, and that the art of the 1980s was a reflection of this interaction.

In summary, the debates and discussions of the 1980s in Chinese art were characterized by a pluralism of styles and a focus on modern consciousness and the definition of a Chinese modernity. The debates and discussions were influenced by both Western and Eastern traditions, and the development of modern Chinese art was a result of the interaction between these traditions.
Another influential trend, that of conceptual art (called by Gao the anti-subjective trend), aimed even more radically at overcoming all aesthetic and cultural norms, including the results of the art of the post-Cultural Revolution era. This trend employs deconstruction and absurdity. Most notably the events organized by Xiamen Dada and Huang Yongping's Roulette Series, as well as Gu Wenda's Pseudo-characters and Wu Shanzhuan's Red Humor series, initiated controversies. Highly controversial were such strategies as the implication of chance in the process of creation (Huang Yongping) and the postulation of the semantic emptiness of the Chinese written language, the epitome of Chinese culture. The latter strategy was considered nihilist by the officials. Also controversial were the combination of trends of Western modernity and post-modernity, such as Dada, Neo-Dada and pop art, with traditional Chinese thought, for example Chan Buddhism. The official art critics could not accept such a proposition. For them, the equation of traditional Chinese thought with trends of Western modernity that were considered nihilistic was unthinkable. Jin Ye condemned these trends as the "expression of an unrestricted liberalism and subjectivism", as well as a kind of nihilism that would only trigger chaos. Tan Shiqi, who attempted an analysis of the compatibility of Chan Buddhism and modernity, concluded that anti-rational, chaotic tendencies were a hindrance to the development of a modern Chinese art and culture. In this respect, the debate is part of the extensive discussion concerning how to combine autochthonous Eastern tradition with Western influences, and which tendencies of the Chinese tradition should be used for the generation of a modern Chinese culture, Huang Yongping humorously answered this question: he washed Wang Bomin's History of Chinese Painting (Zhongguo huixi shi) and the Chinese translation of Herbert Read's Concise History of Modern Painting for two minutes in a washing machine.

In the mid-1980s, the concept of post-modernism was introduced through the writings of Jürgen Habermas' and J.F. Lyotard's, and, most notably, through the reception of Frederic Jameson's theories, as taught by him at Beijing University in 1985. The reception of Dada, Neo-Dada, conceptual art, and pop art, as well as the publication of Jameson's Beijing lectures in 1986, resulted in the notion of post-modernity appearing in numerous articles published in the major art magazines. A discussion on the subject of a Chinese post-modernity started immediately, a discussion that at the beginning focused mainly on post-modern architecture. Art events such as those of Xiamen Dada, and articles like Huang Yongping's "Xiamen Dada - a Kind of Post-Modernity?" ("Xiamen Dada - yi zong houxiandai?") introduced the notion into the field of contemporary Chinese art. However, in China post-modernism did not become relevant for contemporary art until the 1990s.

In late 1988, Wang Guangyi's slogan "Liquidate humanist enthusiasm" dramatically upset the Chinese art world. The slogan's immense influence can be ascribed to its formulation at a time when the cultural euphoria of the cultural elite began gradually devolving into a cultural depression. Obviously, the project of cultural innovation required more radical measures. The deconstruction of the modern myth (xiandai
shenhua), a notion designating Mao Zedong's revolutionary utopias as well as that of the Chinese avant-garde, finally aimed at the liberation of art from all kinds of negative or positive fixation on ideology. Art, originally a vehicle of ideological strategies, now should be nothing more than strategy (youxi). Wang's concept thus created the base for the non-ideology centered nature of the artistic trends of the 1990s.

[169] This was the title of a column in the magazine Art Trends June 1986. For symposia see the Zhezhi Symposium, and for articles see, for example Gao Minglu (1990a, 3).
[169a] This notion lost its negative connotations only in the second half of the 1980s. See also Wang Jing (1996c): p. 141.
[169b] See chapter 1 and chapter 3.2.2.
[169c] For detailed discussion of the controversies through 1985 see: Huang Zhixian (1985a): pp. 24-42. Huang Zhixian also gives a lot of important articles.
[169d] See chapter 3.1.1 and 3.1.2.
[169h] Also in the official understanding, modernism comprised the Western styles of late 19th and early 20th century, such as impressionism and post-impressionism.
[169i] See for example Shao Yangke (1979) and Shao Yangke (1980).
[178] See chapter 1. For some of these artists see: Feng Guodong (1983) and Zheng Ming (1981).
[180] Li Xiongcai (1983).
[182] Li Xiongcai (1985).
[190] See chapters 3.2.1, 3.2.3, and 3.2.4.
[193] See chapter 3.2.1.