



Teaching Labs | China 1980s: Art in the Age of Social Transformation

Transcript of the talk

Date and Time: Sat, 28 Mar 2015, 10am-1:30pm

Venue: Jockey Club Ti-I College

Speaker: Anthony Yung, AAA Researcher

Language: Cantonese

Length: 54 minutes

I. Development of Art in China during the early Twentieth Century

The 1980s was a pivotal turning point in contemporary Chinese history for two reasons: first, the Cultural Revolution ended; second, the Chinese economic reform began. The 1980s marked an important shift for China's policies, economy and culture—its changes in ideologies were also reflected in different aspects of the country's practice, and art could indeed articulate these changes. AAA carried out the research project "Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art From 1980-1990." In terms of art history, the concept of contemporary art emerged in China in the 1980s. My lecture today will offer a template to help understand why contemporary art emerged in Mainland China during the 1980s, including its process and issues it focused on.

However, to understand the 1980s, perhaps we need to begin our discussion from the 1920s. There is a main narrative throughout twentieth century Chinese art history. A keyword of this main narrative is "realism." Realism is the most important or most mainstream style of twentieth century art in China. It was first introduced to China during the New Cultural Movement in the 1920s to 1930s. The New Cultural Movement has achieved different results, one of which is the "Vernacular Language Movement." The "Vernacular Language Movement" intended to replace archaic Classical Chinese with a written language that was more easily understood by the public. China experienced significant reform in the 1920s—its constitution and culture were modernised and changed radically. Thus, it was extremely necessary to have a common language where everybody could easily express new

ideas and messages. With the same objective, similar incidents also happened in the art (including literature, theatre and visual arts) field—and were subsequently included in the literature of “realism.” After years of extensive development, traditional Chinese art such as ink-wash painting has evolved into a remarkably sophisticated art form for well-educated elites. These traditional works have very stable themes (such as landscapes, animals and flowers) and use many allusions and symbols to convey them. Therefore, one would need to be culturally knowledgeable to understand the artwork. On the other hand, realist art achieves the exact opposite: it intends to provide art that is instantly understood by the general public, and is helpful in expressing novel ideas. The first Chinese scholars and theorists who introduced realism used renowned works by Russian literary critics such as Belinsky and Chernyshevsky. On this basis came Xu Beihong, an artist who contributed significantly towards artistic ideas and education in the twentieth century. During the 1920s and 1930s, Mr Xu Beihong first studied in Japan, before continuing in France. While studying overseas, he learned about approaches of art education utilised in modernised regions such as Europe and Japan, specifically the teaching of European classical art. He introduced this form of art education to China.

“Realism” is a complicated concept. Even if we simplify it for our discussion, we must understand that there are two layers to its purpose. First, it holds a technical purpose to recreate the truth. It is concerned with how we can produce artwork that resembles photographs, where audiences will perceive them as real and persuasive images. Second, it carries a conceptual or critical purpose—that is, whether an artwork could reflect an “authentic truth.” This so-called “authentic truth” could refer to the artist’s actual experiences or facts that the artist believes in. Xu Beihong’s *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Retainers* is a Chinese traditional myth—it has no factual basis and can only result from the artist’s imagination. And when artists use realist techniques to present a non-realistic story, there will be a conflict between the two purposes of realism. If we remember this conflict, we will understand that realism could be used as a tool to transmit political messages and stances by constructing the “truth.” By using realism as the main narrative, I will use a very simple approach to explain the various transformations of art in China during the twentieth century.

The aforementioned introduction of realism and Xu Beihong's efforts to popularise realist art education marks the first important period. The second significant period is the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942. The Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art was hosted by Mao Zedong and took place in Yan'an. The forum focused on the role and function of art in socialist nations. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party became China's leading power and formed the People's Republic of China. Mao Zedong valued the role of art in nation building. Through his decision to hold the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art before the Chinese Communist Party gained state power—when they were still fighting against the Chinese Nationalist Party—we can see how he views art as crucial to politics. Principles discussed at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art are actually very simple, but these exact principles greatly influenced the development of Chinese literature and art for the entire twentieth century. There are two particularly important principles. First, art is just a cog in the machine of the Proletarian Revolution. In other words, art should serve politics and not serve art itself. Second, any abstract or obscure ideas are refuted. Rather, art should be loved by the public, meaning that art should express a positive message which can be understood by the mainstream audience. What changes occurred after these two principles were raised at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art? One of the results was the "New Year Picture Movement" during the late-1940s to early-1950s. Now shown on the screen is Zhang Jianwen's New Year picture. New Year pictures are an art form commonly found in China's rural areas—people would put up some festive pictures at homes as decorations. Traditional New Year pictures often portrayed harvests or festive occasions using bright colours and clear, strong lines. After becoming the ruling political party, the Chinese Communist Party encouraged artists to use this art form. In order to publicise the Chinese Communist Party's political achievements, artists were encouraged to replace the festive elements of traditional New Year pictures with celebrations of the Chinese Communist Party's accomplishments, adding details such as Mao Zedong's portrait, the Chinese flag and the five-star red flag.

The third important period was the mid-1950s, which was shortly after the People's Republic of China was founded. The main reason for changes made during this period was the transforming relations between Mainland China and the

Soviet Union. In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union and China grew closer and became the closest allies among communist states globally. As the leading state of communism, the Soviet Union provided China with all kinds of support on economic, technical, military, technological and other aspects. The Soviet Union also offered assistance in art— they sent the best artists recognised by them to give lectures on art in socialist countries to art school lecturers from all over China. Afterwards, these art school lecturers would pass this on to their students. The main artist sent by the Soviet Union back then was Konstantin Maksimov, who organised some training courses for lecturers. At the time, socialist realism was the most prominent artistic style in the Soviet Union. Socialist realism carries techniques or aesthetics that are very similar to European classical paintings. This is Luo Gongliu's *Mao Zedong Reporting on the Rectification in Yan'an* (1949-1950). Visually, they resemble works of artists during the French Revolution such as Delacroix. In order to portray a significant historical event, they carry strong historical features and comprehensive arrangements. Of course, present-day scenes are replaced with important moments of the Communist party or the Communist revolution such as Mao Zedong's Yan'an speech. This style was very popular in the early 1950s and was known in China as "thematic art", meaning that artists would be given a theme by a superior and convey it using the best and most "appropriate" ways.

The fourth most important period of change happened during the 1960s to 1970s, the peak of the Chinese Communist Party's political movement and personality cults. An even more extreme form of art arose during the Cultural Revolution, of which Mao Zedong used two terms to describe: revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism. *Ten Thousand Li Across the Yangtze River* is a very good example. Technically, it is still realist as the people and objects are lifelike portraits. However, its scenes, details and plot are completely surreal, and particularly reveals ideas of a personality cult: Mao Zedong is situated in the middle, surrounded by countless red flags. This form of absurd and sophisticated art is commonly known as "Red, Light and Bright" and "High, Great and Perfect." It is worth mentioning that the works I referred to are just typical examples. Other styles and ideas certainly existed, but I think that most of them were bound by similar political objectives. This is because the government exerted extreme



ideological pressure and only allowed artists to create works in this manner. They did not have any artistic freedom and could only produce art by following superiors' orders or policy directives. Of course, they could somewhat exercise their creativity—but they must abide by an absolute style, an absolute purpose. Otherwise, they will face serious consequences and be publicly denounced—some artists were even imprisoned for their art. This was the situation in the 1950s to 1970s.

II. 1980s: Major shifts in Art

Two extremely important events happened in 1977: Mao Zedong died and the Cultural Revolution ended. This was an important turning point for modern China. I will use two phrases to illustrate this turning point: “Big Yes Big No” and “Black Cat White Cat.” “Big Yes Big No” is artist Wu Shanzhuan’s translation of the expression “a matter of significance”—a cardinal belief of early communism (in both China and the Soviet Union). It is rooted in absolutism, a principle emphasised by classical communist theories. Absolutism covers definite concepts such as economic, foreign policies and class struggle. Communism advocates for absolute submission towards Marxism or leaders of the nation. This led to a highly confrontational society and set of ideologies before the 1970s. When Mao Zedong passed away in 1977, China entered an era of reform. During this period, Deng Xiaoping was China’s paramount leader. Deoung Xiaoping famously said: “It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.” This saying expressed a belief that completely opposes “Big Yes Big No.” It advocates for pragmatism, where we do not examine the nature of the “cat.” As long as it is useful and can attain an objective, it is good enough. This experimental belief, where people would ambitiously explore what worked and what did not, significantly influenced China’s new generation.

I have referred to “the 1980s” throughout. This refers to the period between 1977 and 1989, generally referred to as “the 1980s.” I made a diagram which will help you understand the focus of artistic shifts back then. The circular core as seen in the middle of the screen is made up of socialism, realism and the belief that art

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serves politics. These were the dominating principles that influenced Chinese art before the 1970s, which I have just mentioned. The political and cultural landscape shifted in the 1980s, giving artists an opportunity to divert from the core. Instantly, they discovered that there were numerous possible directions upon leaving the core. These possibilities can be classified into two dimensions. The horizontal axis indicates issues related to medium. On the left were those that chose to retain traditional conventions, which are the four art forms taught in traditional Chinese art institutions: Chinese paintings, oil paintings, prints and sculptures. Those on the right were part of an ontological revolution. Their values are relatively similar to those of modern-day contemporary art—artists were not restricted by medium as they pursue freedom to the extent of dematerialisation. During the 1980s, artists began to cross the boundaries of traditional art forms. The vertical axis is related to the “function” of art: pointing downwards were those who perceived art as a tool for social critique and progression. In other words, art itself was not necessarily very important—it was only a tool to allow people to reflect on societal issues and make social progress. Facing upwards were those who believed that art was an intellectual and spiritual exercise. This is similar to the modern view of “art for art’s sake”, where art is autonomous and does not require a direct relationship with society. Instead, art is related to altering individuals’ beliefs, which will alter everything else. Regarding this debate, it is worthwhile to read the article “The Significance Does Not Lie in Art.” It states that the shifts in the style of Chinese art during the 1980s were not important, because art is merely a symbol, experiment and fantasy of social and intellectual liberation. The article was written by Li Xianting, an important theorist who believed that art itself was not important. Instead, he believed that the achievement of intellectual liberation through art was most important.

Here are some outstanding works from this movement:

The most well-known and popular work of the early 1980s is this piece titled *Father* by Luo Zhongli, a graduate of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. Measuring 216cm by 152cm, this gigantic close-up portrait is visually stunning and is even taller than a human being. People back then rarely had an opportunity to see such a large portrait. What’s more, this is not a portrait of a politician—and particularly not of Mao Zedong. Rather, it features a seemingly poor peasant. This presented a

stark contrast to cheerful artworks that people were so used to seeing, such as the “Red, Light and Bright” pieces which blindly express a sense of admiration. This artwork features superb painting skills which resemble realism. At the time, it was regarded as an innovative and outstanding work because it meant that artists had the freedom to portray the lives and hardships of minor figures, instead of producing works about political heroes or blindly expressing happiness. The impressive style and technique of this artwork also gives it an aesthetic appeal. However, conservative theorists still disliked it and criticised the artist for covering negative topics. These theorists noted that socialist countries should not have to endure any more hardships. Thus, artists should only cover positive topics to gain the public’s confidence towards communism. Nevertheless, the majority of the public supported this artwork. Among commentaries of this artwork, some said that realism did not merely involve imitation. They observed that instead, realism is an authentic reflection of scenes witnessed by the artist. This was an important view for theorists back then. Another similar example—also a renowned series of works from the 1980s—is Chen Danqing’s “Tibetan Series.” Because of similar reasons as mentioned, ethnic minorities have always been an important theme in modern Chinese paintings. However, paintings about ethnic minorities—just like paintings which transmit political messages—used to only display jubilant and beautiful scenes or depict harvest times. For the first time, Chen Danqing expressed a sense of melancholy through her work where Tibetans were no longer glamorous—in fact, they looked quite untidy. This artwork attracted a great deal of attention as people thought that it was very authentic.

The early 1980s saw another step forward as works such as *A Snowy Day in 1968, 1979* emerged. This artistic style was known as scar art. Scar art and scar literature back then all examined memories of the Cultural Revolution, such as people’s sufferings. They also looked back at events perceived to be political and social mistakes from a sentimental perspective. Many young artists have experienced the Down to the Countryside Movement or been through struggle sessions. As this has affected them deeply, some started to express these events visually. This artistic style is very similar to classic socialist realism works I have just mentioned, as it carries many features of European classical history paintings. From a modern perspective, its details and characters feel quite cinematic. However, it is no longer

concerned with the accomplishments of the Communist party. Rather, it captures a snapshot of the Cultural Revolution—it may possibly be presenting scenes from fights or struggle sessions in certain universities. These were the artist's memories when the Cultural Revolution just broke out in 1968. This type of art became hugely popular in the early 1980s, because the Cultural Revolution was a poignant and significant memory for them. Searching for ways to express these memories was an extremely important issue for the art and literature field. Artists kept producing these paintings for at least two to three years.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, artists were able to express their memories from a more critical or melancholic perspective. But how did artists tackle the changing attitudes which arose after the reform and new social climate? Gradually, different styles started to emerge, as seen in Geng Jianyi's *Two People Under the Lamplight*. Geng Jianyi is an artist from Hangzhou. As urbanisation and major changes occurred socially and economically during the mid-1980s, many new ideas had to be expressed through art. In the midst of this, he developed a relatively calm style where he used flat forms that differed from realism. His style can be compared to figures in Western art history, such as American painter Edward Hopper. Edward Hopper's works illustrate the calm, isolated character of American cities. They carry a sensibility that only belongs to urban cities. Another painting by Geng Jianyi is *The Second Condition*. It is clearly different from his previous works: while he has created an upbeat and positive atmosphere, he stripped the work of context and only left us with a laughing head. This laugh is somewhat maniacal, expressing a sense of nihilism or perverted revelry. A type of blind optimism may have existed back then, which was reflected by this work.

These two paintings show the contrast between new and old styles in the 1980s. To your right is *On the Hopeful Field*, a piece accepted by authorities in the mid-1980s. At the time, there still was a distinction between what authorities approved and did not approve. The juxtaposition of these two works can clearly show this distinction. *On the Hopeful Field* won awards at the National Arts Exhibition, meaning that it was approved by authorities. It diverged from realism by utilising a relatively free form. The colours and composition of the work also echo modernistic elements. It also contains numerous plays on form, including the

dense use of the colour yellow and a composition resembling photographs. Nevertheless, it is ultimately a display of jubilant or celebratory scenes such as harvest times. A very similar work is Zhang Peili's *Musical Pause*, as seen on your left. The sentiments and observations on society he wanted to express is closer to Geng Jianyi's that I have just mentioned. It carries a calmer or perhaps lonelier feeling. The two pieces both feature musical instruments, which demonstrate the artists' exquisite oil painting techniques. *Musical Pause*, as seen on your left, was a new art piece rejected by authorities.

Another incident that is worthy of our attention is an exhibition held in Beijing in 1979. In terms of art history, it was a very important exhibition. It was presented by "The Stars", a group formed by Beijing-based artists who never attended art school and, naturally, were not approved by the authorities at the time. Artists who were rejected by authorities ran into numerous difficulties when organising exhibitions, such as being barred from entering authorised venues. "The Stars" did something very bold: they hung their own works on the fences outside the National Art Museum of China when it hosted the National Arts Exhibition. This was widely regarded as the first self-organised and non-official art exhibition in China, and holds an important place in history. Of course, the exhibited works were extremely different from approved artworks. One of the most well-known pieces was *Silence* by Wang Keping. This work clearly symbolises a repressed sense of freedom evident in society. Although this exhibition was not approved by authorities, it attracted a wide audience as the public had never seen such works before, and thought they were unique. Furthermore, the exhibition was held outside the National Art Museum of China, a superb location as many passersby—tens of thousands, reportedly—were able to see the works. However, chaos erupted as police officers issued a warning after two or three days, asking the artists to either end the exhibition or take down the artworks. These artists were unhappy with the decision and held protests demanding artistic freedom. The artist shown on the screen is Wang Keping. This was also the first clash between artists and authorities. Artists demanded artistic freedom and freedom of expression, which were very restricted at the time. This was the most significant narrative for contemporary art in China during the 1980s to 1990s, while it was in search of legitimacy.

A meaningful debate arose in the early 1980s on whether abstract art was allowed. According to the two principles discussed at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, abstract art was inappropriate. First, abstract art cannot express political messages. Second, theoretically, the general public were not able to appreciate abstract art. Moreover, abstract art was criticised for its proximity to capitalism or Western art forms. For quite a period, making abstract art was considered a very serious crime. After 1977, there were gradually more discussions on abstract art involving what was acceptable and what was not. During this time, more people started to think that abstract art was in fact acceptable. The most prominent advocate for this was Wu Guanzhong, who published many articles stating that it was acceptable to make abstract art in communist countries. Why? Because abstractionism—in visual arts terms—is not something that the public will fail to appreciate. In fact, it is simply a purer form of aesthetic appreciation. Even if one is not culturally knowledgeable or sufficiently educated, we cannot say that they are incapable of appreciating the works. Furthermore, what is the function of abstractionism or abstract art in our society? He said that art did not have to carry a clear political message to achieve social progress. Instead, aesthetic pleasure is beneficial towards social harmony and progress. At this point, abstract art also began to appear and debates about it arose. We can see that abstract art and realist art is very different. Art Magazine, the most important art publication in China, ran a feature in 1983 about abstract art and its various approaches in the early 1980s. For example, Li Xianting used spray painting techniques to create a relatively industrial aesthetic. There were also works which imitated primitive and cave art—referred to as primitivism in art history—and cubist, abstract or post-impressionist paintings. Clearly, various forms of abstract art emerged and they seem to be approved and accepted. We could see more extreme forms of abstract art in the works of young artists of the mid to late 1980s, such as those of Shanghai-based artist Ding Yi. They started to observe the relationship between artists and their work, how artists expressed themselves, their emotions when producing artwork, and how artists presented the design and texture behind their work. They also examined whether one could produce artwork that was devoid of personal feelings—a type of abstract art guided by rationality. An even more extreme example is the artist Wang Ziwei. I am not too familiar with the works of this artist, but we can see from this photograph taken at his exhibition that he

produces works with the same pattern. They all have black and white grids—only the size and shape of the paintings differ. From these works, we can observe that the artists have a tendency to reflect on the medium itself. Although art used to only exist within the boundaries of artwork, artists now started to contemplate on what lies beyond the frame.

Another interesting example is the work of Huang Yongping. He is an artist with an interest in Taoism and Zen teachings. He produced a wheel according to *I Ching* divination. He used the wheel to decide how he was going to produce his artwork: this wheel told him, through divination, what colours he should select and how he should use his paintbrush. He then produced four pieces and named them *Four Paintings Created According to Random Instructions and Wheel*. This work raised a question: what place does the artist's personality have in artistic creation? If the artist's personality and decisions were the most important elements of art, then could an art form which negated the artist's personality exist? While based on the *I Ching*, these paintings are similar to Dadaism in terms of its form. In fact, there are also conceptual similarities: they both examine absurdity and arbitrariness.

At this point, we can begin our discussion about the horizontal axis as some artists have started to move towards the right—meaning that they have started to reflect on media or art itself. Huang Yongping lives in Xiamen and collaborated with other local artists at the time. They organised a few events under the name "Xiamen Dada." On one occasion, they put up an exhibition at Fujian Art Gallery when there were no official exhibitions underway. At the end of their exhibition, they burnt all the works in the open area behind the museum. In another event that also took place while there were no exhibitions underway at Fujian Art Gallery, they collected sands, stones, construction waste, garbage and other materials and carried them all into the art gallery. Later, they rearranged the materials to become an "art exhibition" that people were skeptical about.

There were also some experiments on new art forms. Gu Wenda is an ink artist based in Shanghai and resides in Hangzhou. He is a very talented ink artist and was already a young teacher and experimental artist at the time. He was concerned with the issue of whether one could revolutionise ink art beyond the frame. The evolution of ink art has always been constrained within the boundaries

of artwork, such as its technique and use of ink and colours. If we were to move beyond the artwork, how could we revolutionise it? He then contemplated whether he could create an ink painting where people could enter into—a type of ink painting that totally immerses itself in the environment. Therefore, he produced several large-scale calligraphy works and incorporated it with other materials to become a gigantic, immersive ink artwork similar to installation art. This piece is titled *Wisdom Comes from Tranquility*. He used some words, checkmarks and crosses for its imagery, clearly referring to some visual memories of struggle sessions during the Cultural Revolution. Wu Shanzhuan is another similar artist. He also produced a work similar to installation art titled *Today No Water* (also known as *The Big Characters (Dazibao)*), where audiences were invited to enter the artwork. He wrote many words similar to this and constructed a form similar to big-character posters from the Cultural Revolution. There were a lot of these posters, condemning articles and propaganda publications during the Cultural Revolution, often exhibited in public spaces. He utilised this form, but changed its contents to meaningless or even pointless words. He wanted to examine whether the true meaning of words or sentences will be negated when words are used repeatedly, and transmitted to audiences excessively. Regardless of whether such words are meaningful or meaningless, they seem to have lost their meaning under this context. This is actually a precursor of reflections on excessive political propaganda and its excessive stylisation.

Even more extreme examples came about in the late 1980s. During this time, an art form known as “proposal art” emerged. This refers to works which only have a proposal and are never executed. For example, this work by artists Gu Dexin and Wang Luyan features many signs, symbols and designs similar to this. In fact, the work consists entirely of sensory descriptions, such as “soap bubbles coming right at you”, “22-degree wind blowing at you”, “the sensation when you walk on soil, sand, water and mud without shoes.” While this series of works hints at a physical, sensory experience, it does not provide an installation or scenery that allow audiences to truly experience these feelings. It only uses the simplest words and images to tell audiences about these experiences, so these experiences can stay in their imagination and perceptions. The artists were interested in the differences between physical experience and mental imagination. The following two pieces

are works by artist Zhang Peili. As far as I understand, this is the first artwork that consists only of text. The work on the left has a very interesting title of *Exhibition Procedures*. At the time, he had a series of paintings named *X?*. While he really wanted to exhibit these works, he realised that first, it was quite difficult to organise an exhibition at the time; second, many artists were reflecting on the meaning of putting on exhibitions. Thus, he thought: why couldn't I just write out the exhibition? Why do I have to actually put it on? Eventually, he wrote a piece similar to an instruction manual, introducing the style of the works and the form of the exhibition. This is interesting as no matter how detailed the artist describes each painting with words, there will inevitably be major differences. For example, there will be huge differences between his description of the painting's colours, angles and use of light and the physical viewing of the painting. Moreover, individuals' imagination differ from one another and he wanted to examine this issue. On the right is another of his pieces, *Art Project No. II*, where he set out items similar to a legal document or guidelines. It is concerned with how one should see a certain object, how it should be viewed by others, and the relationship between seeing and being seen. He produced a series of rules about seeing, which made people very frustrated as they were overly detailed. In another of Zhang Peili's works, he collected many rubber gloves while he was living in Hangzhou, then shredded them before placing them into envelopes. He then attached an instruction manual and mailed them to some art school students in Beijing. He did not know these students and only sent these letters randomly. The instruction manual asked the recipients to act as if nothing had happened, and stated that there was no connection between the fact that they received this letter and any actions they took. They were also instructed not to investigate who had sent them the letter, and to behave as if nothing had happened. Through this work, he wanted to look into interpersonal communication and relationships, and explore the peculiar feelings which arose psychologically as a result of random happenings.

We can now broadly understand the various experiments brought about in the 1980s by the core values of socialism, realism and the belief that art serves politics. It has built an important foundation for what art should become and where it should go. At the same time, many interesting works appeared in the 1980s. The



above examples allow us to understand the evolution of artists in the 1980s, including their artistic journey and process.

III. Extended research topics on the evolution of social attitudes and ways of thinking

Art in China during the 1980s was certainly very important from a historical perspective. What are some topics from this period that are worthy of discussion?

The first topic concerns art institutes, its pedagogy and libraries. This is an important topic as all universities and art institutes in China closed down in the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. As they did not organise any classes or take in new students, many individuals who should have been studying or receiving higher education had no means of doing so. The most significant event after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1977 was the resumption of higher education and art institutes. For this reason, talents accumulated from over ten years applied to art institutes simultaneously. Under this fierce competition, only elites were accepted by art institutes. Many of the progressive and innovative experiments I have just mentioned were produced by graduates from art institutes. However, there was a discrepancy: art institutes were still relatively conservative and focused on technical aspects of realism as propagated by the Soviets. How did these students grow out of the education they received? Were they influenced by some of the lecturers? This is a very important research topic, but it also has its difficulties as most of the course outlines and literature on art education are not available to the public. They are all internal documents, as many art institutes in China do not have a public archive where people could access such information. This is possibly because there is not enough awareness on this. Teaching materials may also be barred from public access because they may be merged together with policy or financial documents. In recent years, we have discovered that some documents are available for public access, such as this fascinating public announcement. This is a pamphlet distributed in 1977 when art institutes resumed recruiting new students for the first time. It sets out the enrolment requirements of art institutes. I will read out three of the requirements that are particularly interesting. First, "clear

sense of politics and history, supporter of the Communist Party of China, passionate about socialism and labour, complies with revolutionary discipline rules, determined to study for the revolution.” This first requirement is clearly the most important one. Second, “possesses the professional qualities of studying art and a solid foundation in art.” Third, “a healthy body.” Because of the limited literature on this research area, we have to rely on oral history—a key part of this is the interviews with old professors of art institutes. For example, this interview with Professor Zhu Naizheng, former associate dean of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, became a valued source. When AAA carried out its interviews, they also mainly focused on art institutes. We interviewed Zhang Xiaogang for “Materials for the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990”. He is an esteemed and successful artist. He talked about his experience of studying at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute.

Zhang Xiaogang mentioned an important point: art institutes did not run normally during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. When art institutes resumed classes after the Cultural Revolution, its lecturers were very perplexed as to what they were supposed to teach, as they were only recently hired by the schools. Lecturers did not know how to teach and students did not know what to study—ultimately, they were learning from each other. Some said that teachers back then were learning and teaching at the same time. As for students, those that were younger or more adventurous would search for particular books in the library and learn new styles from them. These included expressionist and Van Gogh’s works as mentioned just now, which were not taught by schools. While they intended to learn from these library catalogues, they did not gain a thorough understanding from reading the materials. Instead, this allowed them to develop their own unique styles. In other words, libraries are very important. Although libraries in art institutes stocked many new books, lecturers did not discuss or know anything about them. Therefore, one of our main research areas is on the type of books stocked by libraries back then. The best art institute library was found in the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, now known as the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. It stocked a lot of contemporary books, although most of them were in foreign languages—such as Japanese or English—as those books have not been published in China at the time. Students were in an awkward situation where

they could only look at their images. They did not know what the artists' thoughts and social context were because they did not understand foreign languages. This led to many misconceptions and creative interpretations, which brought about their unique styles. This is a very meaningful topic that is worthy of research.

The second topic worthy of research is on the differing situations in various areas. Areas in China offer very distinct cultures and societies. If we were to discuss China as a single unit, we would be over-simplifying it and severely neglecting its rich historical, artistic and cultural elements. Take Guangdong province as an example: its most distinctive feature is its proximity to Hong Kong. Since the 1970s and 1980s, there has been very close ties between the two, which impacted Guangdong in two ways. First, the Guangdong community was introduced to consumerism and material culture earlier than other regions in China. Second, the cultural vibe in Guangdong was different from other regions in China due to the influence of popular culture, such as popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan imported in the form of cassette tapes. Therefore, the works and creative processes of artists from Guangdong are very unique. AAA has produced a documentary on contemporary art in Guangdong.

Another important place is Shanghai. Shanghai was originally the international metropolis of China. It is a very advanced and modern city with modernist traditions. In the 1920s and 1930s, many renowned artists who first emerged during the New Culture Movement and the modernist era also lived and worked in Shanghai. At the time, the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts was also one of the most important art institutes in China. When communist China was established, many esteemed modernist artists either left China, moved to Taiwan with Kuomintang or emigrated to Europe. Those remaining could not do much under the oppressive realist or socialist cultural policies. They could not teach in art institutes or participate in exhibitions, and their works also faced criticism. Many of them laid low in Shanghai, as they were mostly Shanghainese or lived there. They worked on a variety of relevant or unrelated jobs, such as the role of a designer in factories. One of these artists is Mr Chen Juyuan, who worked as a caretaker in a greenhouse. From the 1950s to the 1970s, their artworks could never be exhibited and were completely unknown to the public. Thus, after the Cultural Revolution

ended, these artists organised exhibitions at once. Another artist with a similar background is Yu Youhan. He started producing some very remarkable modernist landscapes since the 1980s.

In the mid-1980s, some artists started to re-examine the self-disciplinary, reflective and philosophical values of art. They considered that art did not have to be related to society. Therefore, they wanted to get rid of the heavy burden—which has strained them for many years—that art must serve politics. They did not want to use art to express social issues, as they only wanted to produce art for art’s sake—works that are related to ideas and aesthetics. On the other hand, some artists believed that art is ultimately a means for the betterment of society. Both these views appear simultaneously in Yu Youhan’s works, where he presents the two extremes. For example, this piece highlights his style in the 1980s—we see some abstract circular images that are seemingly related to Taoism beliefs and cosmology. However, shortly afterwards, he produced these pieces that incorporate “political pop” elements. He extracted some classic Mao Zedong images and utilised design techniques to construct a cluttered appearance. This created a popular visual image that contained advertising elements, allowing him to express images from memories of communist China with an ambivalent attitude as he does not offer any compliments or criticisms.

Other than Shanghai, Beijing is also a relevant place. Beijing has always been a highly restrictive city. During the 1980s, Beijing was known for the presence of many diplomats, foreign journalists and correspondents. While Beijing was home to many foreigners, most people around the country have never seen any foreigners. These foreigners played a very important role: many of them were young intellectuals or studied in Europe, the United States or Japan and supported experimental art. Therefore, some Beijing artists would gain the support of these foreigners. Some of them would bring artists the latest catalogues from abroad or inform the artists of the latest news. The artists could also put on exhibitions in some consular officers’ homes or at the consulate. As these venues face less censorship, a phenomenon known as “diplomatic art” emerged.

The third area of research is on foreign exhibitions. Before the 1980s, not many foreign exhibitions were put on in China. As a result, there was widespread response from the community whenever major foreign exhibitions were presented in China. For example, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston presented *American Paintings* in Beijing and Shanghai. The exhibition displayed a selection of American contemporary art pieces, including some abstract expressionist paintings. As it was the first time these original works were presented in China, many students were very excited to attend the exhibition. From a modern perspective, many styles and forms that emerged in the 1980s can be traced to Western art history and compared to similar works. However, our focus is not on how artists in China imitated foreign art at the time. Rather, we are examining why artists in China selected those styles among many others, and why they found them effective or useful. Another important event is Robert Rauschenberg's exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1985. The exhibition featured numerous ready-made materials and installation art pieces. It was particularly impactful as it was the first time the National Art Museum of China exhibited such peculiar and rich works, which perhaps resembled waste or garbage.

The fourth topic is on reading. During the 1980s, an important cultural phenomenon emerged. Since the establishment of communist China, there has been major restrictions on publishing and the dissemination of information. Because of this, many books cannot be published or circulated. In the 1950s to 1970s, many intellectuals and youngsters did not have access to books although they had wanted to read. They had no choice but to circulate and read books covertly. This situation changed after the Cultural Revolution, when the publishing industry resumed functioning. Many books and new materials, which were banned for the past thirty to forty years, appeared all at once in overwhelming numbers. Consequently, a large portion of the public noted the importance of reading to quench their "thirst" in the past. This cultural phenomenon is known as "cultural fever" or "reading fever." Regardless of their major studies—whether it be in art, sociology or philosophy—students back then would read a variety of books. Artists would read about phenomenology, philosophy students would read novels, and literature students would read about Freud. Therefore, the research focus of this topic is on the books that were published back then: what types of books were

