11

Conclusion

I have drawn a picture of the historical logic of the Chinese total modernity project and the cultural avant-garde, from the synthetic desire (*zhongxi hebi*) in the early-twentieth-century avant-garde, to the political qualities of the "art for art's sake" mentality in the amateur avant-garde in the post-Cultural Revolution period, to the anticonceptual attitude in Chinese "idea art" (*guannian*), as well as to the meditative practice (rather than formalistic and material concerns) in apartment art and maximalism. This whole picture, however, does not amount to merely addressing a phenomenological difference between Chinese modern art history and that of the West, nor do I attempt to deny the profound influence of Western modern civilization on Chinese art. What I specifically seek to address is a different mentality and approach to modernity in twentieth-century Chinese art, which has been shaped by, or has responded to, an inner cultural logic unique to the particular historical context of twentieth-century Chinese history. In this context, Western modernism and postmodernism have become two of the major reference points and resources for the Chinese cultural avant-garde as they generated a synthetic modernity while incorporating tradition. Nonetheless, as discussed above, conventional Western representational art, in particular the realistic style, has also become one of the major models for Chinese conservative, academic, as well as corrupted (either ideologically or commercially) avant-garde art. This realistic style may also be considered as a parallel model of modernity in the Chinese context. However, it has been generated by a philistine sociological view imbued with pragmatism on an ideological level which benefited Mao's propaganda art project, then morphed into contemporary academic art, and colored, as well, the short-lived projects of political pop and cynical realism.

One of the major functions of the Chinese avant-garde, therefore, is to formulate a critique of the two forms of kitsch (Mao's kitsch and avant-garde kitsch), and this critique is similar to one Clement Greenberg indicated was present in the Western avant-garde half a century ago. The readers of this book may find that the amateur avant-garde in the post-Cultural Revolution period, the '85 Movement in the 1980s, and apartment art and maximalism in the 1990s have taken this critical responsibility seriously. Meanwhile, the artists of the Chinese avant-garde also committed themselves to accomplishing a total modern cultural enlightenment (*wenhua yishi* in Chinese, meaning priority of cultural consciousness) through art-making, an enlightenment that is different from that of Western modernization, which many Western scholars (such as Max Weber) have well defined as including the autonomy of morality, science, and art.[1] The practice of the early-twentieth-century Chinese avant-garde initiated, and the '85 Movement then reinitiated, this commitment to cultural modernity. It is a synthetic modernity with no splits between art, politics, and morality. It takes into consideration the Western model of modern enlightenment on the one hand, and modifies it by incorporating traditional Chinese synthetic models on the other. This is what the Chinese call the synthesis of China and the West (*zhongxi hebi*). The approach of *zhongxi hebi*, however, has been qualitatively and specifically differentiated in different periods.

The realist model of Chinese kitsch and the modernist model of the cultural avant-garde are both derived from the same philosophical thread of Western modernity, including a dichotomous

relationship between aesthetic modernity and social modernity.[2] In the beginning, however, the Chinese cultural avant-garde claimed that a combination of Western modernism and Chinese tradition would transcend both Western modernism and Chinese tradition from a methodological point of view, in terms of both the creation of art and a theoretical narrative. One may list a number of examples of this synthetic outlook in the approach of the Chinese avant-garde artists: for instance, Huang Yongping's Chan-Dada theory, and his "nothingness" approach; Gu Wenda's pseudo-characters as nonsensical narrative and ideology; Wu Shanzhuan's "red humor"; Xu Bing's "meaningless meaning" from his *Book from the Sky*; the metaphors of north land, yellow land, and south land applied by the Northern Art Group and the Southwest Art Group; the meditative function of grids, dots, and tracing in maximalism; the synthesis of family life, surroundings, and art materials (rather than pure dematerialization) in apartment art, and so on. They all have pursued a peculiar methodology merging art, life, and society in the name of a total modernity project.

But what is the theoretical ground that has driven the Chinese avant-garde to a different, synthetic theory from its Western counterparts; and what is its inner logic? Put the other way around, can we continue to apply Western modernism or postmodernism as a playground of influences to interpret twentieth-century Chinese art without considering the different social context, the specificity of twentieth-century Chinese historical conditions, and China's longstanding ties to traditional cultural forms? If we cannot, then what integrative theory might be applied to the future study of Chinese contemporary art? Recently, I published a theoretical work titled *Yi Pai: A Synthetic Theory against Representation*, in which I investigate and critique Western theories of classicism, modernism, and postmodernism from a broad view of comparative studies.[3] I argue that no theory from Western art history can be defined without reference to the notion of representation, which regards art as a substitute for human reality, concepts, and logic, namely a mimetic substitute for truth and reality.

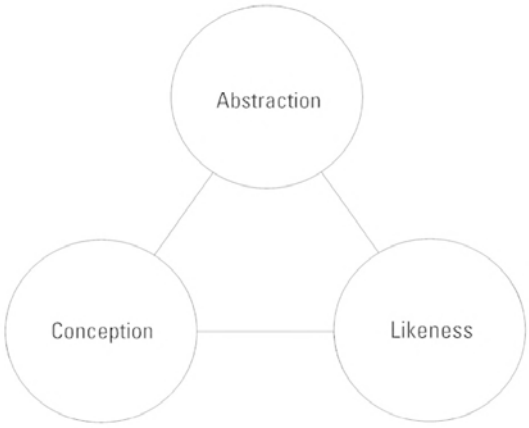
It is this notion of representation's relationship to "truth" that has set the foundation for realism and conceptual art as well as abstract art, three vital domains in Western modern art. Therefore, modernism, postmodernism, the contemporary avant-garde, the historical avant-garde, and the neo-avant-garde, all these categories of Western art are, in fact, in pursuit of a real, authentic, original representation of the truth, either from the outside world or from inner thoughts, even though they may claim a deconstructive approach against conventional visual representation. It is just another extreme gesture in the pursuit of mimicry of truth. But how one can fit this theory of representation to those cultural areas where there has never been an idea of a substitute for "truth," in an absolutist sense? For an equivalent example, the real or truth in Chinese is *zhen*. In ancient China, however, almost all philosophers who discussed goodness (*shan*) and beauty (*mei*) in artistic expression never touched upon the issue of "the truth" (*zhen*), because they had no desire to let art mimic the real. In Chinese aesthetics, art never bears the responsibility to substitute for visual reality or true thought-logic. Ancient Chinese theory always respects *yi*, or "something that comes from your mind," which in the Chinese context always merges image, concept, and scene. This synthetic resonance tendency has been embodied in the theory of Chinese literati landscape design, calligraphy, and poetry. These never bear the responsibility of mimetic representation, nor do they pursue an extreme expression or conception in the sense of Western aestheticism.

The consequences of the philosophy of mimicry of truth and the theory of representation in Western art lead visual art, in particular contemporary art, toward viewing certain portions of the world in terms of fragmentation, transience, and extremity as well as isolation. This theory has departed far from a synthetic outlook on humanity. With few exceptions, most philosophers and theorists of the twentieth century, worldwide, have fallen into this fragmentary, deconstructive framework, exemplified by the linguistic theories of constructivism, Marxism, and Heidegger's existentialism.

The domains of realism, abstraction, and conception all address their autonomy from one another, assuming their respective positions to be extremely distant. Accordingly, Western art has

transitioned from a tactile perspective in Egyptian art to single-vanishing-point perspective which generated the classical realist style in the Roman and Renaissance periods (see Alois Riegl). This three-dimensional illusion met the modern revolution under the slogan "painting is painting itself," and it saw a parallel liquidation of literary narrative. Modernists believed that their methods directly represented the "idea," the supremacy of which has been underscored in Western metaphysics since Plato, and therefore modernist flatness became a teleological priority and was advanced over (perspectival) three-dimensional illusions. This debate, however, merely reveals the dichotomous model of representation of an absolute truth throughout modernism's history.

Conceptual art (as well as postmodernism in general) began to challenge this model by getting rid of dimensional issues and challenging the materialization of art, by insisting that any objects, even readymades, could be applied directly to substitute for truth, as long as they bore a conceptual logic (or an embedded social critique). Although Western conceptual art attempted to transcend the dichotomy of modernism, its revolutionary concept of what art is is still compartmentalized in an object world. Although it has broadened the manner of art expression, which was only confined within the issue of flatness versus three dimensions in classical and modern arenas, and it reached the realm of free choice of objects (readymade, earthwork, human body, even words, writing, and voice), the fundamental idea of what art is still remains the same, namely, that art functions as something that should substitute for something else (e.g., the truth or the real). Therefore, the revolution of postmodernism only minutely advanced over the classical and modernist representational worldview in a broader context of subject matter. This broader view was caused, however, by the disillusionment of postmodernists who knew that representation would never be able to reflect something we can see or think about, such as a text, as the old semioticians and modernists believed. Instead, for conceptual art, or the neo-avant-garde, representation itself was framed by an institutional (as well as a linguistic) power that we are not able to discover through texts (or artworks) per se. Therefore, representation is a discourse of power,



Abstraction: presenting the idea
Conception: Inquiring whtat is art
Likeness: imitating visual reality

All three are separated to extremity

Figure 11.1

Three domains from Western modern art.

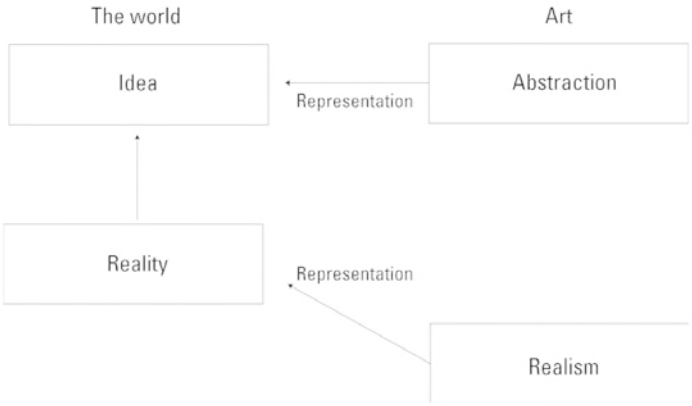


Figure 11.2

The principle of modernism.

rather than a language that arbitrarily presents a truth, as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida pointed out. It seems, however, that there is still a fundamental connection between the two, as figure 11.2 shows. In figure 11.3, I illustrate the cycle of the dichotomy theory from modernism to postmodernism. In figure 11.4, I make a comparison between Saussure's structural semiotics and poststructuralism. The upper diagram here is from Saussure's book; the bottom one I made myself to indicate the poststructuralist theory of the relation between text and context. Although poststructuralism is more advanced in terms of a mutual relation between text and context, it seems to me that it is still trapped by the conventional dichotomy principle.

The postmodernist theories initiated by the French School have inspired me to think about the methodological issues concerning the interpretation of Chinese contemporary art. The sophisticated poststructural theory of the relationship between text and context have also stimulated my interest in transforming Chinese traditional concepts in art into contemporary theory, which I have now named *yi pai*. This is perhaps also a project of the synthesis between East and West, or *zhongxi hebi* on the theoretical side, which one may consider an off-time attempt to establish a new grand theory (since the grand master narratives of the West, as postmodernists have noted, were not only an incomplete project but a failed one). I constructed my *yi pai* theory with reference to an ancient Chinese theory of *li*, *shi*, and *xing* (principle, concept, and appearance) from the ninth-century Tang Dynasty. *Yi pai* literally means "school of resonance/synthesis." *Yi pai* is formulated in a pluralized structure rather than a dichotomous one. Furthermore, *yi pai* theory demonstrates a worldview continuous from the ancient period, which valued synthesis rather than fragmentation. From a methodological perspective, *yi pai* favors *yizai yanwai*, or "the truth being always beyond language," rather than a dogmatic or logical reflection of truth or reality.

However, Chinese ancient aesthetics, while admitting that *yi*, or "something that comes from your mind," is dissociative and elusive, tries to overcome this defect of images or *xiang*: as Confucius

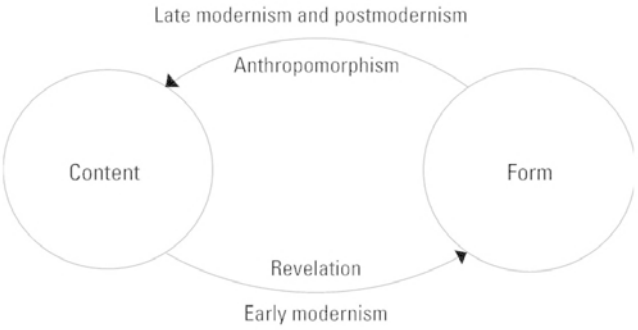


Figure 11.3

Content versus form: the dichotomy model of Western modernism.

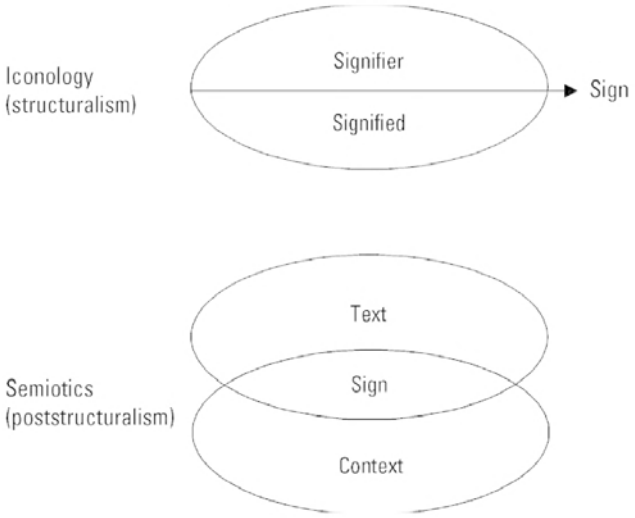


Figure 11.4

Dichotomy models of iconology and semiotics.

said, "to establish the images in order to capture the fullness of the concepts in those minds" (*lixiang yi jinyi*). Therefore, traditional Chinese aesthetics has high expectations of images or *xiang*, because *xiang*, which is an empirical category, is neither a subject nor an object. Instead it includes observers, the thing being observed, and the moment and contextual process of observation. The level of complexity inherent to the concept of *xiang* is of an entirely different order from mimesis in the West.

One thing we should keep in mind is that the "image" in early Chinese aesthetics, for example in the *Yi jing* or Book of Changes, should not be confused with the illusionistic "likeness" that

Western representation speaks about today, because the "likeness" is no more than a state of the "image." The "image," in traditional aesthetics, can be divided into three categories, as the *Yi jing* indicates. The first category pertains to the hexagram, or the *guaxiang*. This dates back to the Great Treatise of the *Yi jing*, which is very similar to what Chinese find in Western modernist painting, known as abstraction (*chouxiang*), which literally means "to summarize images into a principle."[4]

The second meaning of the "image" has to do with the calligraphic connection with statements, or *ci*. Its function is to append statements to give the fullness of what was expressed through both words and images, namely, to express in calligraphic writing whatever is inexpressible in speech.[5] The third is "what you are looking at," or the actual images. In this context, "image" means "appearance of things." To summarize, there are three categories of "images" in the *Yi jing*: hexagrams, calligraphy, and appearance.

If y*i* is a realm of the mind wandering, then *xiang* is the embodiment and resemblance of *yi*. The embodiment includes three types, hexagrams (*guaxiang*), calligraphy (*zixiang)*, and appearance (*xingxiang*). The three types of *xiang* also have three correspondences in the manner of visualizing *yi*, described by the Tang Dynasty scholar Zhang Yanyuan as *li*, *shi*, and *xing*. Zhang said, "The concept of art expression (*tuzai*) contains three topologies. The first is the form of principles: the forms of the hexagrams are such (*li*). The second is the form of concepts: the study of written characters has to do with this (*shi*). The third is the form of appearance (*xing*), and this is paintings."[6] As a matter of fact, principle, concepts, and appearance in traditional Chinese aesthetics correspond to three such concepts in the West, notably abstraction, conception, and realism in modern art. It is easy to understand the correspondence between *li* and abstraction, *shi* and conception, and *xing* and realism.

In the process of development of Western modern art, abstraction, conceptualism, and representation are mutually exclusive, as we saw in figure 11.1. However, *li*, *shi*, and *xing*, in ancient Chinese theory, are always in an inclusive, relational, overlapping, and mutually resonant state. This synthesis was embodied by poetry, calligraphy, and literati painting throughout the ancient period, and is the foundation of Chinese traditional art. This synthetic theory corresponds to traditional philosophy and the three domains of *li*, *shi*, and *xing* as the visualization of the philosophy. Therefore, the synthesis and resonance of these three domains represents a different epistemological approach, as well as a major difference in visual art between the East and West. It has nothing to do with a framework that is based on representation of the real or absolute truth; rather it is an embodiment of the relational structure between man, things, and the world.

It is this different mentality and visual philosophy that has framed the idea of total modernity and the cultural avant-garde in Chinese modern and contemporary art. In total modernity theory there is no desire for the autonomy of art, or a split between morality and science. In visual art, the synthetic theory of *yi pai* indicates that the principle (*li*), the concept (*shi*), and the appearance (*xing*) are always in a relationship of cross-fertilization, overlap, and correspondence. The May Fourth generation still kept the synthetic mentality, even when Western modern civilization impacted Chinese culture in the twentieth century until Mao's revolutionary art become the dominant force. Hu Shi's famous saying, the synthesis

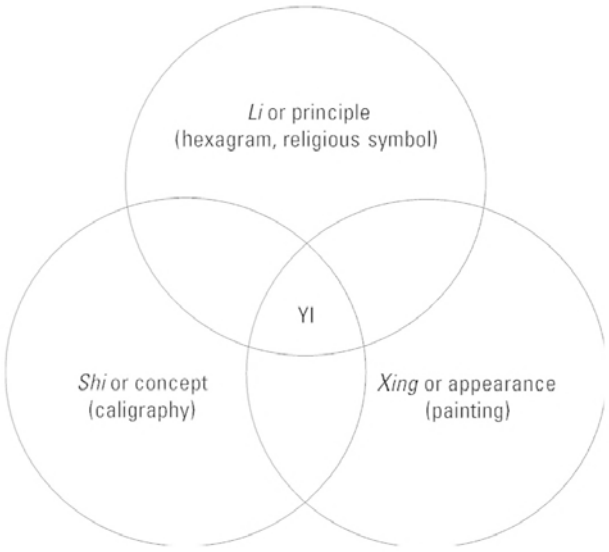


Figure 11.5

Three domains from ancient Chinese art theory.

of "particular time, specific space, and my choice," perhaps is a perfect footnote for the ancient theory of *li*, *shi*, and *xing*.[7] Even in Mao's mind, art was no more than a part of revolutionary life, although art is a political ideological instrument. It was during Mao's social realist period that the ancient synthesis theory was almost abandoned. And the generation of the '85 Movement had to revitalize the early dream, which seems to remain a challenge today.

This is the historical reality that makes me think about the possibility of finding a new methodology. This desire came early during my Chinese graduate school period, when I wrote my thesis titled "Zhao Mengfu's Archaism and the Transition between Song and Yuan Painting Aesthetics." It was a historical study on the transition from the art of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) to the literati painting of the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368). In that period, I carried a strong intention to get away from Mao's representational theory (art is a reflection of social life), because in it art practice and history became a mirror of the social background. In this philistine method, it was easy to insert a social meaning and subjective interpretation into a ready subject matter of artworks. Instead, I wanted to put art practice into a relationship between political life, poetry, calligraphy, and the scholars' mentality in general, to pinpoint the significant changes in the early Yuan Dynasty within the movement of literati painting led by Zhao Mengfu and others.[8]

Interestingly enough, while young Chinese art historians attempted to break down Mao's old Marxist social theory after the Cultural Revolution, in the West postmodernism arose and rebelled against modernism. One of the instruments employed was neo-Marxist theory as adopted by some new art historians, including T. J. Clark and Thomas Crow. This dislocation in the different cultural arenas seems to have existed forever. In the 1990s, when globalization and urbanization become the dominant influences on art-making in the West, China's apartment art and maximalism rejected the economic and ideological framework in place by making objects that were unsellable and unexhibitable, except in a familial space. In this case, both materials and symbolic meaning are isolated from the outside forces of globalization and the market. It was a kind of meditation involving labor that was time-consuming as well as difficult, because it touched upon personal things. From a material point of view, one might like to define the artworks of the Chinese avant-garde as either minimalist or Western neo-avant-garde, in an anticapitalist institutional context. Further study, however, reveals that the Chinese contemporary approach is totally different from either Western modernism or globalized postmodernism.

As I discussed in the last two chapters, maximalism and apartment art exist as a search for infinite, undelineated space. The maximalists have no interest in the wholeness of their compositions, which emphasize the difference between center and edge. They do not create independent or self-sufficient paintings. On the contrary, they aim to express their spatial concepts through unfinished forms imbued with the concept of continuation to the infinite. Their "wholeness" is realized in a series of partially completed works. According to the maximalists, there is no fixed, isolated, or unchangeable space limited by a frame. Space is a kind of relationship, always moving and metamorphosing. It is a kind of *yi pai* spatial theory.

Therefore, the "space" in maximalism is neither a composition portraying the spiritual idealism aimed at by the early modernists, nor is it the closed, unchangeable, theatrical space of the minimalists, nor something as symbolic as a gesture in the dichotomy of individual versus global, as the popular theory of globalization describes. On the contrary, maximalism seeks to express the infinity of visual space, not its wholeness. It is anti-wholeness and anti-theatricality. Furthermore, the space of Chinese abstract art goes far beyond its physical presence; it consists of both interior and exterior space. One cannot truly understand the "space" inside the artwork without a thorough comprehension of the conceptual space of the artist in the relation between interior and external world.

Accordingly, we can compare early Western abstract art (e.g., Mondrian) and later abstract art (e.g., minimalism) with Chinese *yi pai* (e.g., maximalism) using the diagrams in figures 11.6–11.9. It may help to consult the images for a better understanding about the dislocation of the spatial approaches that reveal a different worldview.

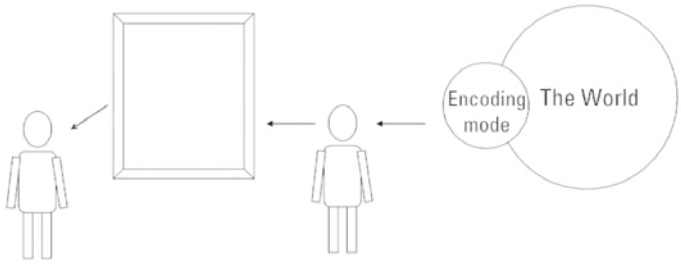


Figure 11.6

Individual encoding mode of Western early modernism.

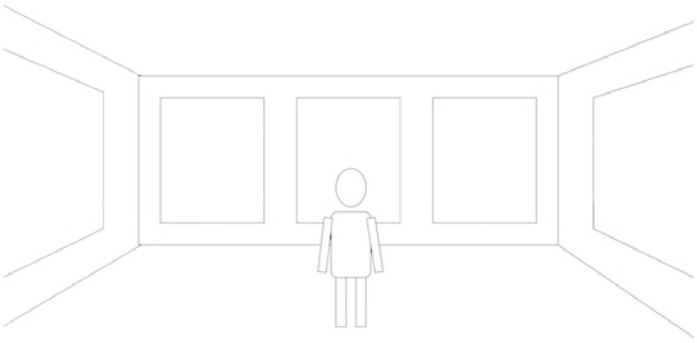


Figure 11.7

Theatricality—late modern: minimalist model (1).

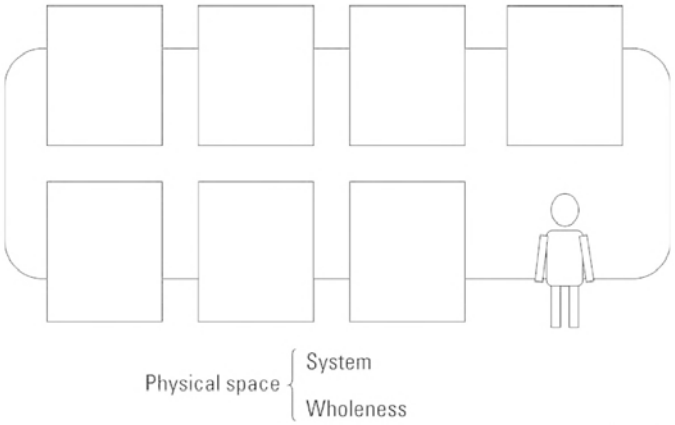


Figure 11.8

Theatricality—late modern: minimalist model (2).

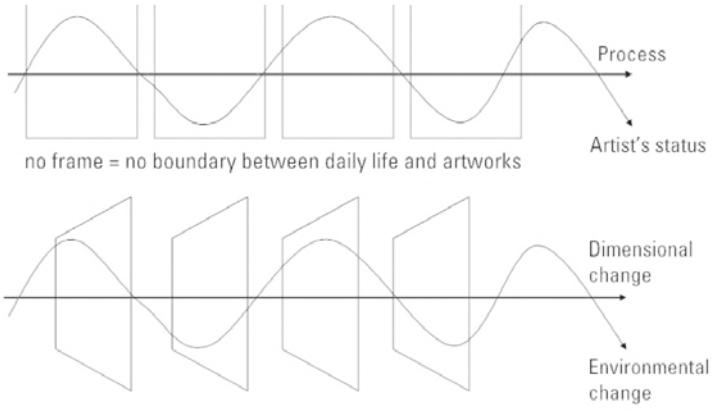


Figure 11.9

Maximalist and apartment art model.

One of the functions of *yi pai* theory is to discover and describe this dislocation. In postmodernism, there are many theorists who have discussed the concept of ambiguity that inspired me to develop *yi pai* theory. However, *yi pai* is by no means a return to dichotomous ambiguity, such as subject versus object, text versus context, signifier versus signified, etc.; rather, *yi pai* attempts to go beyond dichotomies to establish a structure consisting of triple, even multiple layers, as an interpretive model of dislocation. The synthesis of *yi pai* theory is thus by no means a simple additive method, like $a + b + c \ldots$; rather it is a main method of interpretation of both art and history by discussing the overlapping portions (not two-dimensional, as the current diagrams limit, but multidimensional in the form of perpetual motion) between *li*, *shi*, and *xing,* namely the mixture, approach, and departure portions between abstraction, conceptualism, and realism in the well-known terms of Western art.

Although today, in this period of so-called contemporaneity with the digital revolution in visual culture, the three categories may rarely be applied in criticism, the presumption of the three categories, and of the dichotomy of representational theory, may still provide a framework for criticism and art historical research, in particular when some critics look at a non-Western contemporary art phenomenon. The discussion of art and history in this book attempts to demonstrate these presuppositions by unveiling certain misunderstandings of Chinese contemporary art. For instance, the idea of total modernity and the synthetic cultural framework of the avant-garde in both the early twentieth century and in the 1980s; the tie between the avant-garde and Mao's revolution; the political existence of the "art for art's sake" faction in avant-garde art during and after the Cultural Revolution; the art with a modernist appearance that reveals a nonevolutionary spatial consciousness (but instead a meditative spatial consciousness) in the artworks of maximalism and apartment art, and so on. All this dislocation, from the point of view of Western modern art, needs to be understood with a specific framework of history, as well as a synthetic overview.

Some of the chapters in this book come from writings I published in one form or another years ago.

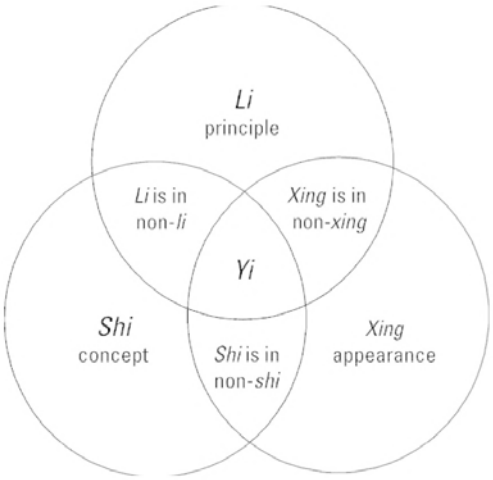


Figure 11.10

***Yi pai*: dislocation is formed within synthesis.**

Although they do not, perhaps, fit my new direction in theoretical work, *yi pai* theory, very integratively, they might send certain messages about *yi pai* theory I have just introduced above.

Today when globalization and urbanization continually swallow indigenous heritage with various fragmented theories, such as deconstruction and appropriation in the domains of art-making, cultural originality has been thrown away, while the coherent and harmonious traditional philosophy of human beings has been replaced by "transience" and "fragmentation." Is it possible, however, to reestablish a synthetic theory against the fashionable interpretation of globalization and urbanization that favors the "fragmentation" of the human mind and the "consumption of personality" in visual art criticism? Especially when China has now also joined the world community of industrialization, commercialism, pragmatism, and instrumental rationalization, while facing the problem of modernity and the avant-garde similar to what the West faced during its own industrialization in the period of romanticism, roughly in the mid-nineteenth century? Because of this, when I wrote *Yi Pai* and this book, I by no means meant to establish a particular art form, movement, or style in either the material or historical sense, but rather I intended to enforce the true humanistic spirit in art with reference to the specificity of Chinese culture and history in the twentieth century.

Glossary of Key Chinese Terms in the Order in Which They Appear in the Text

Introduction	
modern	xiandai
modern fashion	xiandai shishang
modern metropolis	xiandai dushi
modern style	xiandai fengmao
modern design	xiandai sheji
contemporaneity	dangdaixing
spirit of an epoch	shidai jingshen
modernity	xiandaixing
cross the river by jumping from stone to stone on the riverbed	mozhe shitou guohe
painting society	huahui
art group	qunti
artists' village	huajiacun
art district	yishuqu
apartment art	gongyu yishu
proposal art	fangan yishu
experimental art	shiyan yishu
avant-garde	qianwei, xianfeng
kitsch	yansu
alleys	hutong
humanism	renben
new woman	xinnüxing
city image project	chengshi xingxiang gongchen
pretty woman	fenzi
post-Cultural Revolution era	houwenge
idea art	guannian yishu
universal current	yuzhouliu
New Mark Group	Xin kedu
Analysis Group	Jiexi xiaozu

Chapter 1	
cultural revolution	wenhua geming
cultural movement	wenhua yundong
debates about the cultural confrontation between East and West	dongxi wenhua lunzhan
cultural debates before and after the May Fourth Movement	wusi qianhou de donxi wenhua lunzhan
culture	wenhua
cultural consciousness	wenhua yishi
self-conscious cultural ventures	wenhua zijue
synthesis of East and West	zhongxi hebi
avant-garde literature	xianfeng wenxue
avant-garde fine art	qianwei yishu
modern	xiandai
new wave	xinchao
novelty	xin
revolutionary	geming