

Avant-Garde and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art

The flourishing of avant-garde art in the 1980s did not happen by chance; it was rooted in an avant-garde mentality that originated in the early twentieth century. And the late-twentieth-century avant-garde movement can be considered, in my view, an incomplete project of the early twentieth century's modern cultural program initiated or symbolized by the May Fourth Movement.¹ It is also a descendant of Mao's revolutionary art, continually carrying out within itself the prevailing utopian sentiments of Mao's revolution, yet in an inverse perspective regarding Mao's political ideology.

Revolution, therefore, is regarded as a core factor of both modernity and the avant-garde in twentieth-century China. However, the revolution is not confined to the realm of political change; rather it should be considered part of a total modernity that in general can be named a "cultural revolution" (*wenhua geming*) or "cultural movement" (*wenhua yundong*).

It seems that the cultural modernity project of the 1980s closely resembled both the process and the topics of the modern project from the turn of the twentieth century. Intellectuals from both the early twentieth century and the 1980s believed that cultural falseness and inauthenticity caused the backwardness present in society. Therefore, the greatest task and responsibility of the avant-garde was to enlighten the multitude with a modern cultural and philosophical thought system. This stemmed from the fact that the avant-garde, in both the early twentieth century and the 1980s, believed that the most effective way to rescue China from backwardness was to improve her culture. This fundamental belief in many ways was an outgrowth of the Confucian tradition that saw a merging of morality, politics, and art as the

fundamental goal of human life. The twentieth-century Chinese avant-garde in art and literature is thus a part of the two major cultural movements of the 1920s and 1980s: first the May Fourth New Cultural Movement (*wusi xinwenhua yundong*), and second the "cultural fever" of the 1980s (*bashiniandai wenhuare*). Both involved extensive heated debates concerning the cultural confrontation between East and West (*dongxi wenhua lunzhan*). These debates are indispensable contextual references for any discussion of the Chinese avant-garde.

The first debate, which scholars usually call "the cultural debates before and after the May Fourth Movement" (*wusi qianhou de donxi wenhua lunzhan*), took place between 1915 and 1927.² The New Literature movement emerged in approximately the same period.³ However, the New Art movement appeared slightly later, between the late 1920s and the middle 1930s, preceding the Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

The second debate took place in the middle of the 1980s, when a large number of Western works appeared in translation, most notably those of philosophy, history, aesthetics, and psychology. Numerous scholarly conferences were held, one after the other. Chinese scholars, both in China and abroad, involved themselves in the debate. At the same time, ancient Chinese philosophy, history, culture, and religion were reevaluated, criticized, or accepted according to contemporary standards. The discussion proceeded in three stages, as in the early twentieth century: first, analyses of similarities and differences between China and the West; second, comparisons of the respective merits and flaws of Chinese and Western culture; and third, discussions of the future of Chinese and Western culture. In the Chinese art

world, the struggle between antitraditionalism and traditionalism focused on the questions of whether or not tradition requires modernization, what relevance modernism has for contemporary art, and Chinese attitudes toward and evaluations of Western contemporary art. It was during this period that the '85 Movement emerged.

The '85 art movement, commonly called the '85 Movement (*bawu yundong*) or '85 New Wave (*bawu xinchao*), was the first nationwide avant-garde movement. A few avant-garde events or groups, like the No Name and the Stars, had emerged in the post-Cultural Revolution period before the '85 Movement. They were not, however, a nationwide phenomenon, but rare splits from the mainstream. The '85 Movement emerged suddenly as the first contemporary art movement in China, consisting of about one hundred self-organized avant-garde groups from different provinces. The individual groups, however, knew little of one another until I gave a talk on "The '85 Art Movement" (*bawu meishu yundong*) at a national conference held in Beijing in April 1986, effectively coining a new name for the movement. Then the movement spread even more widely to remote provinces, such as Inner Mongolia and Tibet. A full discussion of the '85 Movement follows in chapter 3.

The crucial fact that the meaning of the avant-garde in the Chinese context is tightly bound up with the concept of culture, rather than split or separated from politics and aesthetics, is further evidenced by the repetition of cultural debates and the linkage between the May Fourth Movement and the '85 Movement.

This is the reason that the Chinese avant-garde did not emerge immediately in the aftermath of major political events. Avant-garde art emerged almost a decade following the two revolutions, the New Cultural Movement after the demise of the last dynasty in 1911, and the '85 Movement after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Both the New Cultural Movement and the '85 Movement did not take place until the new consciousness of cultural change had had time to spread. For the Chinese avant-garde, the notion of culture (*wenhua*) is not something that is autonomous or isolated from politics and morality, as in the Western modern

project; rather it is a synthesis of all three spheres. Furthermore, *wenhua* is a deep-rooted concept, coming from the idealism of Confucian tradition embodied in the literati's awareness of social responsibility. "Cultural consciousness" (*wenhua yishi*),⁴ the "cultural avant-garde" (*wenhua qianwei*),⁵ and "self-conscious cultural ventures" (*wenhua zijue*)⁶ have continually played a role as the core precepts of the Chinese avant-garde mentality during the twentieth century.

With this origin in mind, we may have a better understanding of why Mao named his ten-year political movement between 1966 and 1976 the Cultural Revolution. The establishment of systematic proletarian culture was the ultimate work in the project of Mao's "continual revolution" (*jixu geming*). The primary goal of *jixu geming* was to launch a proletarian campaign in the new era against the revisionist (*xiuzhengzhuyi*) trend, a term that was first used in 1960 to target the Soviet Union. Later it was wielded against Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and other leaders of the Communist Party of China, accused of being the Soviets' followers and of taking a direction of peaceful evolutionary socialism in all areas, including the political, economic, and cultural, in the years from 1949 to 1966. Mao's ambition was to completely liquidate any existing system—whether that of Western modern civilization or of the Soviet Union—within the socialist camp. Therefore, the Cultural Revolution was an inevitable revolutionary program to let the masses become "self-enlightened" (*ziji jiaoyu ziji*) and "self-emancipated" (*ziji jiefang ziji*). In Mao's design, the Cultural Revolution went beyond a political campaign; it was rather a great revolution which deeply touched the human soul (*chuji renmen linghun de dageming*), one that attempted to accomplish "reform in education, literature, and art, as well as all superstructures that do not fit the socialist economic base, thus digging out the roots of revisionism."⁷ In other words, "culture" (*wenhua*) in the proletarian Cultural Revolution was not confined to cultural areas in the sense of disciplines; rather it was a notion that referred to the whole superstructure. Furthermore, the method of the movement was to have all the proletarians enlightened and rebelling against the revisionist superstructure. It is a continuation of the program

of the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, as Mao said. But it gave the cultural mastery to the proletariat rather than the cultural elites.

Historically, one can see how this cultural consciousness (*wenhua yishi*) was essential to the ultimate project of modernity at the outset of the modern history of China. As such, the May Fourth New Cultural Movement was a consequence of the failure of the earlier industrial and political modernization that had begun in the middle of nineteenth century. We can say that the search for modernity went through three phases following the end of the First Opium War in 1842. First was so-called industrialization. The humiliation of military defeats by the British in 1842 and 1860 and then by the French in 1885 stimulated the Qing government to pay attention for the first time to improving China's military force and establishing military schools in order to compete with modern foreign military technology. In this stage, modernity meant reinforcing the military, which was equivalent to industrialization. However, the belief that a strong military could save China did not prove true, as it was buried by Japan in the defeat of 1895 and by Japan and Western allied powers in 1900. The consequences of defeat led to political reforms that aimed to change the corrupt political system. Inspired by the Japanese Meiji Restoration, and with the help and advice of intellectuals, Emperor Guangxu initiated the Hundred Days Reform of 1898 in order to improve the political system. The failure of the reform, however, again shocked Chinese intellectuals and caused them to reevaluate traditional culture. Ultimately, the prevailing perception was that cultural backwardness was China's greatest weakness. The most effective way to wake China up and strengthen her system was to undertake a cultural revolution.

The *wenhua yishi* of May Fourth is now generally understood not only as the day in 1919 when students in Beijing protested against the Chinese government's self-compromising policies toward Japan, sparking a series of uprisings throughout the country, but also as a significant symbol of modernity, a modernity that transcended and unified the industrial and political realms with the new slogan "science and democracy." It is the May Fourth legacy that has been considered as the model of the ultimate, total modernity.

Therefore, for all the Chinese vanguards of the twentieth century—political, scientific, cultural, and artistic—"May Fourth" is a romantic imaginary moment quintessential to Chinese modernity.

This *wenhua yishi*, or concept of cultural modernity initiated during the May Fourth moment, was set aside and lay dormant at two periods during the twentieth century. One was during the Sino-Japanese War, from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s, and the other was during Mao's rule, from 1949 to 1976. This is by no means to say that a cultural establishment program did not exist in Mao's revolutionary project. On the contrary, Mao considered proletarian culture (mostly peasant culture) an ultimate feature of his total revolutionary project. In Mao's total modernity, art was an ideological instrument and served the people. To serve meant not only to represent the people, but also to be owned by the people replete with their own revolutionary discourse. This ideological totality already departs from the May Fourth Movement's cultural modernity because Mao positioned art as a reflection of life (mostly political), though he never attempted to make a split between art and life as in Western modernism.

Therefore, we may consider two different tendencies in the total modernization of art in the twentieth century in China. One is the cultural modernity project that attempted to synthesize Western modernism and Chinese tradition (*zhongxi hebi*); the other is Mao's legacy that was vastly influenced by Western representational theory through Marxist socialist theory in a pragmatic way. These two tendencies also appeared within the avant-garde throughout the twentieth century. The first can be seen in the cultural avant-garde initiated in the 1920s and 1930s, the New Art movement that favored the synthesis of Western modernism and traditional Chinese culture. This movement might seem to be an unqualified avant-garde in the purist sense of the European historical avant-garde.⁸ Mao's proletarian avant-garde, on the other hand, is quite clearly closer to what the early-nineteenth-century utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon declared "avant-garde."⁹ However, Mao's avant-garde never attempted to march in the "vanguard of all intellectual faculties"; rather, its purpose was to serve the ignorant multitude of humanity.

The Merging of Avant-Garde Art and Revolution

During the 1930s, Mao's revolutionary art merged with the early intellectual avant-garde, e.g., the Woodcut Movement and left-wing art, both of which developed out of the New Art movement and can be considered descendants of the May Fourth Movement. In this chapter, I shall discuss the different groups represented in early Chinese modern art, as well as the merging of the avant-garde and revolutionary art and theory in the 1930s. I will also discuss the art of Mao's period, which is designed and framed, in many ways, very much as a revolutionary avant-garde with an ambiguous nature. One complex tendency is toward a complete and pragmatic break with any past, and the other is toward an extreme expansion of the social sphere in artistic terms. The first shares a common understanding with modernism, and the latter with postmodernism. In a very practical way, Mao's revolutionary art went on a journey from Sovietization to nationalization.

In the early phases of Mao's art, Chinese avant-garde art merged with Mao's revolutionary theory and artistic production, most notably in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. The merger came from the sympathy of the avant-garde for Mao's revolutionary principles, combined with the influence of radical Marxism in the social revolution. Both were invariably present in the subject matter of the avant-garde artworks of the 1930s and 1940s. Although the relationship eventually turned sour, as the foundations were laid after 1949 for the totalitarian propagandist art of Mao's era, the merger nonetheless demonstrates the different fate and project of the Chinese avant-garde compared to its Western counterpart.

The English term "avant-garde" has been translated into Chinese either as *xianfeng* (usually used for literature) or as *qianwei* (usually used for fine art). The military term *xianfeng*, which refers to the position of a vanguard troop commander, had been used for a long time in classical Chinese culture.¹⁰ The term was not employed in a cultural or artistic sense in China until the 1930s, when some proletarian writers used this concept, directly translated from the Russian, to refer to Chinese revolutionary proletarian literature. One of the very radical magazines of the Left Wing Writers Association was named *Xianfeng*

in 1932 in Shanghai. During the 1930s and again in the 1980s, however, alternative terms, such as "modern" (*xiandai*), "new wave" (*xinchao*), "novel" (*xin*), and even "revolutionary" (*geming*), were used to refer to avant-garde literature and art within a Chinese context.¹¹ Therefore, although the term *xianfeng* may not have appeared before 1932, it does not mean that there was no such notion of an avant-garde movement and its associated theory and praxis.

During the 1920s, the literary and artistic theories of the European avant-garde were introduced into China. Reports on avant-garde literary movements in Europe began to appear in Chinese magazines from 1921, and interest seems to have reached a peak in 1922–1923.¹² For example, in the important *Eastern Magazine* (*Dongfang zazhi*), at least one article introducing Western modern and contemporary art and literature was published in nearly every issue, from the first issue of 1921 to the last issue of 1923.¹³ This trend was revived in the 1980s when Western works were again discussed and displayed in the periodicals.¹⁴

From "Revolution in Art" to "Revolutionary Art," from "Art for the Life of the Masses" to "Mass Art"

A series of movements characterized by art revolutions (*yishu geming*) took place in the second decade of the century, following the establishment of the new Republic of China in 1911. These art and literature revolutions were advocated at first by several influential Chinese thinkers and philosophers, such as Chen Duxiu, Cai Yuanpei, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Lu Zheng, rather than by writers and artists.¹⁵ In 1918, Chen Duxiu (1880–1939), an influential Chinese intellectual and a leader of the New Cultural Movement who became the first chairman of the Communist Party of China in 1921, was more explicit in his call for a "revolution in literature" (*wenxue geming*) or a "revolution in art" (*yishu geming*). Here, the revolutionary change in art was to abandon the traditional style of ink painting known as "Four Masters" (*Si Wang*), and that of seventeenth-century traditional painting, and to find a Western modern form suitable to a future establishment of Chinese modern art. The primary imperative was that new Chinese art and literature be

as rationalized and modernized as science was.¹⁶ This scientific side in art was “the synthesis of the East and West” (*zhongxi hebi*), or as Liang Qichao (1873–1929) wrote in his 1898 “Travels in Eleven European Countries”: “Now, at this historic moment, it is up to those who are up to the challenge to arise. They must begin a new era by combining Chinese and Western art.”¹⁷

The main goal of this revolution was to reevaluate tradition and pursue a new modern system of Chinese literature and art. Although there were many different concerns about and experiments with the modernization of art, the central intention of this revolution was to create “art for people’s life” (*yishu wei rensheng*). Although this movement was still intrinsically a manifesto born of elite culture, it shifted the direction from traditional, self-cultivated and self-entertaining literati art to an elite art for enlightening the masses. Eventually, because of the continuing influence of Marxism, the dynamic activity of the Left Wing Literature and Art Association in the early 1930s, and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, this “revolution in art” (*yishu geming*) then transformed into “revolutionary art” (*geming de yishu*), further manifested as “making art for the enlightenment of the masses” (*yishu hua dazhong*), and finally transformed into “popular art for and by the masses” (*dazhonghua yishu*).¹⁸

The art movement of the 1930s and 1940s saw the transition of this early modernity in art. There were, however, various approaches among the pioneers in the New Art movement in the early twentieth century. We may consider the different approaches from three different points of view. Paradoxically, however, we may find that all these revolutionary steps and approaches were in fact a transmutation of traditional Confucianism infused with modern Western thought.

The first type of art practice reflected the theory of Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), an advocate of a total aestheticism, in which art is approached with a semireligious emotion. That is to say, art should function as a semireligion in a new modern society, rather than just please the eyes of a small circle. Cai, who was an influential educator and philosopher of modern Chinese history, held the positions of president of the National Educational Ministry and

of Peking University. He first coined the famous slogan “replace religion with aesthetic education” in 1917, two years before the May Fourth Movement.¹⁹ Instead of emphasizing art as an autonomous sphere in a program of rationalization (one of three divided spheres: science, morality, and art), which is the distinctive mark of capitalist society as described by Max Weber, Cai advocated the equal importance of aesthetic education and art practice, believing that their social commitment should match those of religion and morality. For Cai, art and aesthetic education would be of primary importance in the project of China’s modernization. This is nothing more than a modified modern version of Confucius’s claim that “literature and culture serve the universal law” (*wen yi zai dao*). Cai’s aestheticism thus can be seen as a return to Oriental humanism under the modern slogan “art for people’s life” (*yishu wei rensheng*).

This motto expressed concern about the life and suffering of ordinary Chinese people. It was first used by Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), but his intention was applied in an abstract and metaphysical way. A French-trained artist and an admirer of Cai who was a similar leading artist of this type, Lin thought that art existed as an emotional universe and that the function of art should be the expression of a kind of religious emotion. He said, “Basically, art is the production of emotion,” and “All social questions should be the issue of human feeling.”²⁰ His three paintings *Humanism* (*Rendao*) of 1923, *Groping* (*Mosuo*) of 1924, and *Suffering* (*Tongku*) of 1929 all accurately expressed the subject matter that concerned him in this period. His dark backgrounds, contorted nudes, and nonnarrative compositions conveyed an atmosphere of classic humanism embedded within modernist forms.

Even some artists who devoted themselves to an extremely formalist kind of revolutionary art paid a lot of attention to the urban environment and daily life. The typical approach this generated in artistic terms was adopted by the Storm Society (*Juelanshe*), founded by Pang Xunqin (1906–1985) and Ni Yide (1902–1969) in 1930.²¹ In their 1932 “Manifesto of the Storm Society” (“*Juelanshe xuanyan*”), the artists proclaimed: “We want to express the spirit of a new epoch with revolutionary technique. ... There



Figure 1.1
Lin Fengmian, *Suffering*, 1929.

should be a kind of new trend in China's art world in our century. Rising up with hurricane emotion and iron reason, we will create our own world in which lines and colors are interwoven together."²²

In Pang Xunqin's work *Untitled* (1934), we see that he was influenced by Paris modernism, but in the textual description Pang describes his humanistic concerns:

The canvas shows a cross section of a mechanical press. The face in the foreground is a robot; the one in the background is a Chinese woman in the countryside. The first symbolizes the industrial development of capitalist countries; the second symbolizes China's backward agriculture. At upper left, three massive fingers push the press, representing imperialist invasion from abroad and reactionary politics and feudal thinking at home; these are the three major forces working to squeeze the Chinese people, and the forces that have put me at an impasse.²³

Pang's phrase "hurricane emotion and iron reason" is very similar to Lin Fengmian's concept of *zhongxi hebi*, or the "synthesis of East and West." But how? Lin attempted to merge modern feelings with Western technique. He said, "The composition of Western art forms intends to imitate objects. Therefore it often lacks emotion and turns itself into mechanism due to its advanced technique, and art becomes reproduction, like the classical art from the most recent centuries. The composition of Eastern art is not able to thoroughly express emotion, due

to its disadvantage in technique caused by extreme subjectivity. The consequence is that [Eastern art] has lost any function and influence in modern society, as witness the current position of traditional Chinese ink painting."²⁴ Therefore, the goal of the synthetic theory is to combine modern Chinese emotion, a consideration of current society and people, with modern Western techniques. This *zhongxi hebi* is a common point of view for the first generation of artists in the early twentieth century, and it reveals a pursuit of a scientific revolution in art while ensuring that humanism remains.

Similar approaches are also associated with some realistic art. The leading figure working in this typology was Xu Beihong. Perhaps Xu's type of realism should not be considered a movement or even a group, because it never fully developed as a mature stylistic language, nor was it undertaken by many artists in this period. His endeavor to combine traditional ink painting and Western realistic technique, however, has profoundly influenced several generations in both education and artistic practice. Xu's main methodological contribution was to bring realistic techniques and traditional aesthetics to bear on symbolic, often heroic subject matter: his realism did not serve for the representation of contemporary reality, but rather depicted ancient stories as metaphors for contemporary reality. This academic, idealistic, and symbolic "realism," however, also came from the artist's sympathy for human suffering. In *The Foolish*



Figure 1.2

Pang Xunqin, *Untitled*, 1934.

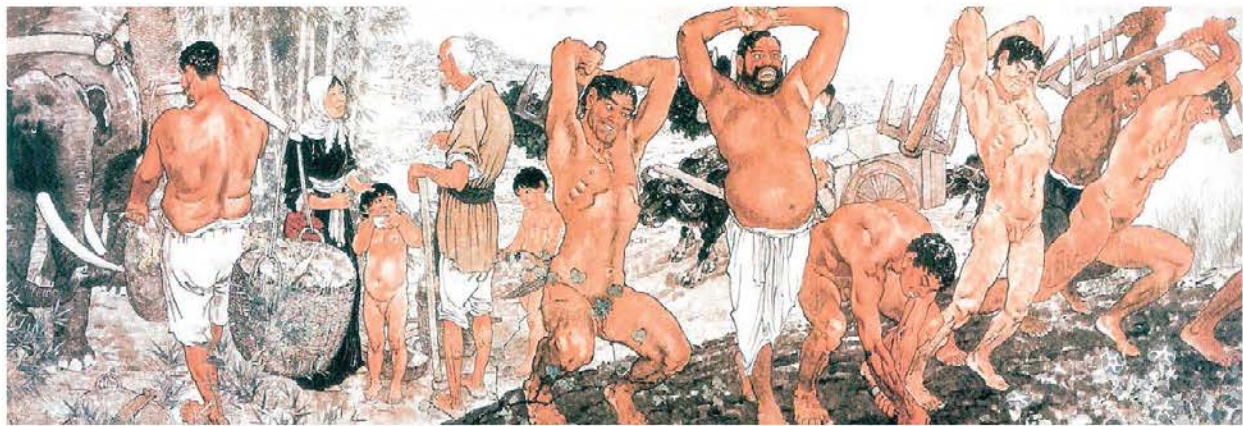


Figure 1.3

Xu Beihong, *The Foolish Man Removing the Mountain*, 1940.

Man Removing the Mountain, Xu used the folk story of a foolish man moving a mountain which blocks his view to symbolize an encouragement of the Chinese to victory over the Japanese during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Late in 1945, when Mao gave a talk during the Seventh National Conference of the Communist Party of China, he used the same story as an allegory for removing two “mountains,” one being imperialism, the other feudalism. The talk was later published as one of his most famous short essays, “The Foolish Man Removing the Mountain” (“Yugong yishan”).²⁵ Thus Xu’s realism relied very much on morality and nationalism, particularly in the period during the 1930s when Japan invaded Manchuria.

This humanist concern was further developed by the left-wing art movement, including the Woodcut Movement and the group known as Street Art (*Shizi jietou yishu*). Their position was very clear: artists are soldiers who represent the vanguard of society. The artists associated with left-wing writers consciously identified themselves as avant-garde. Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of the most influential writers and intellectuals in modern China, directed the new Woodcut Movement.²⁶ The German expressionist painter Käthe Kollwitz, the Belgian painter Frans Masereel, and several Russian woodcut artists influenced the movement. Many of its artists and writers were involved in graphic art, including book cover design, illustrations, cartoons, caricatures, and New Year calendars. Through the media of popular culture, they criticized and allegorized the corruption

of the government. Through close observation of urban life and the common people’s everyday lives, they drew highly critical pictures.

The works of the Woodcut Movement reflected the artists’ strong emotional ties to the same humanistic concerns shared by the Rickshaw Driver’s School (*Renlichefu pai*) in the New Literature movement. Liang Shiqiu (b. 1902), a well-known literary critic of the 1930s, gave the group its name.²⁷ From the 1920s to the late 1940s, the rickshaw was a popular mode of transport for the middle and upper classes in China. The rickshaw driver was typically from the lowest class of society and relied on his own sweat and brawn to earn a living. Liang used this image to describe the works of some writers and artists who illustrated the lives of the poorest people to show their sympathy for their fates.

The proletarian sympathies of the Woodcut Movement are, to a certain degree, similar to those of Xu Beihong’s realism, for both ultimately consider art as a moral instrument. If we follow Weber’s concept of modernization with its split between morality, science, and art, we may categorize Xu and the Woodcut Movement as tending toward moral and social reform, whereas Lin Fengmian and his fellows, such as those in the Storm Society, exhibited a tendency toward scientific revolution in art motivated toward technical reform. There is, perhaps, also a third tendency, which consists of a group of traditional ink painters, such as Qi Baishi, Pan Tianshou, and Chen Shizeng, who viewed their art as a locus of tradition guided by a new aesthetic



Figure 1.4
Hu Yichuan, *Go to the Front*, 1933.

observation. Consequently, the Woodcut Movement and the left-wing artists distinguished themselves as the most radical avant-garde force in the conversion to Mao's revolutionary art principles. Many artists from this group took a journey to Yan'an, the headquarters of the Communist Party after the Long March (1923–1924). It was at this time that the previous elite avant-garde turned into the proletarian avant-garde (*wuchanjieji xianfengdui*).

Two primary aspects characterized the transition of the avant-garde. First, the identity of elite-intellectual artist had to be transformed into that of ordinary member of the masses; in other words, each individual had to leave behind the role of petit bourgeois (*xiao zichan jieji*) intellectual, and, as Mao said, become a proletarian revolutionary. Second, their idea of avant-garde art, which expresses a naive notion that they should take responsibility as individual prophets and saviors, transformed into the propagandist art of classic struggle and revolution. This resulted in the expulsion of any traces of their previous individuality. This formidable transition was both ideological and institutional. The same type of transition of the avant-garde may also be

found to have occurred in the case of the Russian avant-gardists of the early Soviet Union and also the Italian futurists in the period of Mussolini's rise to power.²⁸ However, the transition of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1930s and 1940s was far more smooth and rational than that of the Russian and Italian examples. There are two primary reasons why the Chinese transition was distinctive. First, before the avant-gardists went to Yan'an, they had already been inspired by, and interested in, Marx's doctrine of the proletarian masses, although their concern with the proletariat was mostly based on naive bourgeois-humanist notions. Secondly, the motivation of the Chinese avant-garde was not to create a material utopia in their artworks, as Russian avant-gardists and Italian futurists did. Instead, they tended to express their misery about specific social problems in people's lives.²⁹

The transition of the avant-garde was successfully accomplished under Mao's 1942 Great Rectification in Yan'an (*Yan'an zhengfeng yundong*). After the move to Yan'an, the previous avant-garde artists and writers had put forth claims to a degree of creative independence. This bourgeois stand prompted Mao



Figure 1.5
The transition of the early Chinese avant-garde to Mao's art.

Zedong to launch the Rectification campaign. Mao directed artists and writers to toe the party line, to avoid “realism, sentimentalism, [and] satire,” to put politics before art always, and to respect only those writers and artists who put the interests of the masses first.

The initial ambition of enlightening the masses with avant-gardist idealism was now retained and enforced. Mao, however, never forgave the avant-garde’s quest for independence, and consequently the officials of the previous avant-garde were the victims of accusations during the struggles of the Cultural Revolution. In the end, the avant-garde could not escape from the predicted and tragic fate that had accompanied it since its birth.³⁰ The old avant-garde looked conservative, weak, and colorless, while their concept of the proletariat was completely swept away by a new revolutionary mass art known as Red Guard art, which was a sort of red pop (*hongse bopu*).

Interestingly, when the ’85 Movement arose much later, some conservative critics immediately viewed it as another Red Guard movement because of its organizational structure, which consisted overwhelmingly of self-organized groups much like the “fighting crews” (*zhandoudui*) of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. The artists of the ’85 Movement were the next generation after the Red Guards. Most of them were less than ten years old when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. From an ideological perspective, the artists of the ’85 Movement fought for individualism and the democratization of art, a continuation of the intellectual ideology initiated by the May Fourth generation in the early twentieth century. The orientation toward a total avant-gardism which drove the ’85 Movement, however, might share a common root not only with the idealism of the early Chinese avant-garde, but also with the utopian world of Mao’s revolutionary mass culture.

The New Cultural Movement lasted for about three decades, from the first decade of the twentieth century into the early 1930s. The Sino-Japanese War halted this Chinese “modernist” movement, though the war also kept certain modern groups, in particular the Left, moving forward, reaching the phase of social realism as a major stylistic consequence of the war breaking out in 1937. Unsurprisingly, the early

Chinese avant-gardists of the 1930s chose realism rather than modernism as their language. This came from the movement’s own logic: in the beginning of the revolution, the highest priority was to convert the cultural elite and intellectuals to sympathy with the proletarian class. The new popular identity formation necessitated a comprehensive language, not for the avant-gardists themselves but for the masses and the revolution.

Mao’s Proletarian Avant-Garde

In many ways, the avant-garde of Saint-Simon’s conception may be considered a political avant-garde. It is alien, however, to the Western historical avant-garde. This political avant-garde became a legacy of Stalin’s art, from which Mao’s mass art was developed. In Clement Greenberg’s eyes, they were no more than political kitsch, similar to Hollywood’s commercial kitsch, reflecting the vulgar taste of the masses. The artists of the historical avant-garde, by contrast, he considered to have produced high art, as they committed themselves to the creation of revolutionary visual forms rather than being bodily involved in the social revolution.

The abundance of avant-garde sentiment extolled by the postmodernists, and the accompanying return to political issues, by no means indicates that they intended to return to the “political” avant-garde as it was conceived by Saint-Simon. Rather, postmodernism continues a conceptualized aestheticism, a legacy from Duchamp, whose intention is to establish a new aesthetic discourse by deconstructing any existing discourse. This “revolution” (one may call it a neo-avant-garde) takes political and social issues as the objects of discursive critique, rather than viewing politics and society as the real arena and emphasizing lived experience.

The political avant-garde of Mao’s revolution, however, saw society as its arena, as did the Chinese intellectual avant-gardes of the 1930s and 1980s. This does not mean that their themes and subject matter are entirely political. Rather a certain consciousness drives the Chinese cultural avant-garde in its constant march toward social space. It is this sentiment that imbues both the avant-garde and Mao’s artistic and visual celebrations of revolution. The former is an



Figure 1.6

Luo Gongliu, *Chairman Mao Reporting on the Rectification in Yan'an, 1951*.

intelligent mourning of the old system, the latter a glorification of the new proletarian class. The vanguard of the proletarian class was also called avant-garde (*wuchan jieji xianfengdui*), as Lenin explicitly named that which was oriented by a “revolutionary commitment,” in opposition to bourgeois culture; for Lenin, this vanguard was the Communist Party.³¹ This appears to be a slightly different concept from Saint-Simon’s political vanguard, which he defined as “the vanguard of all the intellectual faculties.”³² But the new avant-garde killed the old: Mao’s proletarian avant-garde project ended in the Cultural Revolution, with the members of the 1930s avant-garde undergoing harsh accusations and punishments at the hands of the zealous Red Guards, the former’s revolutionary sons or grandsons.

Obviously, Mao’s “proletarian avant-garde” learned from the experiences of the Soviet Union. On the whole, Mao did not publicly discuss or make

speeches on the subject of art. Instead, his views on art were largely expressed in terms of culture as a whole. It could also be said that he laid more emphasis on literature than on art, much like Lenin and Stalin.³³ However, the “Speech on Literature and Art at the Symposium in Yan’an,” widely known as the Yan’an Talk,³⁴ was undoubtedly the most concentrated and comprehensive expression of Mao’s thoughts on art. In this speech, Mao discussed class art and promulgated the idea of art as an integral part of the revolutionary machinery, an idea obviously derived from Lenin’s “Party Organization and Party Literature.” As Mao said in the Yan’an Talk, “Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine.”³⁵ Mao’s comments on learning from the ancients and foreigners was also similar to Lenin’s attitude toward traditional and bourgeois art. Mao’s remarks on the relationship

between art and life also borrowed elements from Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky's idea that "beauty is life."³⁶ It was especially in the Yan'an Talk that Mao first clearly pointed out that "we are advocates of socialist realism." Previously, socialist realism had been formally established as a method of artistic creation at the Soviet Union Writers' Representative Conference in 1934.

It was through the Soviet Union that Mao brought the Westernization of art into China. It was unprecedented. Never before or since had any Western art theory played such a profound role in changing the Chinese mentality toward the making of art. Representation, or the reflection of life in the sense of socialist realism, had become a doctrine not only for official academic art, but also for certain forms of "realism" among the Chinese avant-garde. The byproduct of this representational doctrine (*fanyinglun*) is a cliché of philistine sociology that always threatens the revolutionary quality of the avant-garde and its methodological motivation for artistic creation. An extraordinary example of this is the short-lived and corrupted phenomenon of political pop and cynical realism. Thus Mao's legacy set up a dilemma between the idealist "cultural avant-garde" and the radical, but corrupted, "social avant-garde." The latter is the descendant of Mao's proletarian avant-garde.

Like Stalin's theory, the core of Mao's Yan'an Talk emphasized revolutionary mass art and asserted that art should serve the worker, the peasant, and the soldier. Compared with the mass art of the Soviet Union, however, Mao's mass art achieved further development. In particular, the essence of art was more fiercely struck, making it more popular or "popped" on a national or even international level. Rather than transform the revolutionary masses, art should be received by them in a pop way; the artists themselves were to be reeducated by the proletarian masses, eventually creating proletarianized and popped artists.

Therefore, the purpose of revolutionary art was not only to change the point of view or way of thinking and the representation of revolutionary reality, but also to convert the artists' identities. This was a thorough transformation, a process by which an artist's thoughts and emotions were to be merged with those of the masses. As Mao said,

"If you want to merge with the masses, you have to make up your mind to undergo tortuous long-term temptation and endurance."³⁷ For Mao, furthermore, "popularization" or mass style (*dazhonghua*) meant that intellectuals needed to thoroughly abandon their bourgeois language and to adopt that of peasants and workers. Otherwise, their work was merely one of "popularlessness" or "small circles" (*xiaozhonghua*).³⁸

Although the Soviet Union also stressed that art served the public, the main emphasis there was for the artists to transform the public through art, educating the masses and generating an appreciation of visual art. In fact, all members of the Artists Association of the former Soviet Union held high social status and were treated with great honor. None of them were asked to become laborers or farmers. Mao's mass art, by comparison, is pure, transparent, and thorough—not only did art have to cater to, and be favored by, the masses, but artists also had to acknowledge that the masses were wiser than they were with regard to the standards and forms of art. For example, Gu Yuan, named "the great artist of the Communist Party" by Xu Beihong, once visited a shepherd boy in Yan'an to ask for his advice when painting a shepherd print. After the little shepherd boy said to Gu Yuan "no dog, no shepherd," he felt both immediately enlightened and ashamed. He said, "This valuable advice could never be heard in the classroom of *xiao luyi* [Lu Xun Art School]." To participate in the masses' daily lives was the best learning environment for shaping the art and thoughts of proletarian artists.

After the Yan'an Talk was published in 1942, Mao's slogan "Art shall serve the worker, the peasant, and the soldier" became the general guideline for creating art. Mao's period in China went through a process of welcoming the avant-garde in the 1940s, educating the avant-garde in the 1950s and 1960s, and finally killing the avant-garde during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s.

The first of these shifts occurred during the Yan'an period, with a shift from a "humanitarian avant-garde" art (bourgeois sympathy for the proletariat), which was an independent, individual, and modernist expressionist style, to a "proletarian avant-garde" embodied by a folk/realist style. This shift was accomplished in the late 1940s before the founding of the People's Republic of China. The

second shift happened during the “Sovietization” period between 1950 and 1966. This was a shift from a propagandist art characterized by folk simplicity to an exhibitable propaganda art in a refined academic style. In the early 1950s, two phenomena—the New Year calendar movement (*xinnianhua yundong*) and the debates on the reformation of traditional ink painting—demonstrated a need for the renewal of nationalist identity when the nation was newly founded. Later, the model of Soviet socialist realism held sway until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Mao carried out an extreme nationalism during this Sovietization period, however, which to a certain degree planted the seeds of antagonism against the older Soviet brother, before the cordial relationship broke up in the early 1960s. The third shift came during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when the Red Guard violently launched the destruction of the Soviet-influenced academic socialist realism. However, the academic realist style returned after 1972 with greater maturity and was featured as the penultimate example of Mao’s propagandist mass art. It is the art of the Cultural Revolution, in particular the Red Guard art, that defines the uniqueness of Mao’s art, which can be considered as a perfect synthesis of revolutionary and postmodernist art.

During the first phase, the Yan’an period, artistic activities were in fact primarily geared toward the transformation of art, drastically remolding the thoughts of a group of radical left-wing artists who came from Shanghai and other large cities. They were regarded as treasonous toward their own bourgeois class, a revolutionary vanguard in wartime. At that time, the artists who rushed toward Yan’an considered Mao’s project a spiritual model for the future. Their radical thoughts and intellectual capacities were considered major resources for revolution. The priority of Mao’s strategy, therefore, was to remold the thoughts of these petit bourgeois artists to conform with his perspective on class struggle. On the other hand, he used a traditional folk art style (exemplified by woodcut prints) to replace their original resources of Western style.

Almost all art that serves the national ideology has a close relationship with domestic avant-garde art at the early stages of revolution. However, such

avant-garde art is very quickly abandoned, with artists looking back to tradition to create a kind of popular art that is more suitable for the masses. For example, several days after the successful revolution of October 1917, the Russian Central Executive Committee invited representatives of the intelligentsia to Smolny Palace to discuss possible future cooperation. Five well-known representatives from the intelligentsia and the art community attended the meeting, including the futurist Russian avant-garde art leader Vladimir Mayakovsky and artist Natan Altman. This happened because the new Soviet government saw avant-garde art as having a subversive sentiment against conservatism. As Greenberg said, those European avant-garde artists were born out of the original bourgeoisie, and represented unruly libertinism and dissatisfaction with their own class.³⁹ Emotionally they tended to lean toward the Soviet point of view and even supported fascist Italy.

Unsurprisingly, the new government in the Soviet Union tried to gain support from European radical intellectuals by adopting an intimate attitude toward avant-garde art. However, the abstract form of avant-garde art and its strong individualistic tendencies failed to accommodate the content and publicity that the new regime required. That this art was later rejected and criticized is not due to the reactionary nature of the artists, but rather to the excessive naivete and pureness of the art itself. By the early 1930s, the Soviet Union, as well as Germany and Italy, returned to traditional Western classical realism in art, while punishing the avant-gardists who did not support their regimes by instituting a harsh policy of suppression.⁴⁰

A similar phenomenon occurred in China in 1930s and 1940s. Since the beginning of the century, the revolutionary spirit of art in China had gained even greater momentum than that in Europe. During the 1930s, the Chinese revolution in art had been tripartite, and we may divide it into modernists, realists, and leftists. The modernists were led by artists like Lin Fengmian, Pang Xunqin, and Wu Dayu, who had trained in Paris and whose style was closest to that of the European avant-garde art at that time. Considering the social and artistic context at that time in China, they would not be regarded as the most radical, i.e., the most avant-garde, although

their style was the newest and their practice most closely related to the European aesthetic avant-garde. Their “aesthetic” was one that attempted to achieve a synthesis of traditional literati aesthetics and Western modernist form. This desire, in fact, has shaped one of the major trends in Chinese modern art that spread over the mainland in the 1930s and reemerged there in the last three decades. One can also see this synthesis in Taiwan during the 1950s and in Hong Kong in the 1960s.

The realists were represented by Xu Beihong. The concept of realism was undoubtedly closely related to the role and significance of science in China after the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Xu’s legacy, which combines European realism with a heroic symbolism, consequently became the centerpiece of Mao’s artistic orthodoxy. This was true even though Xu did not play a key role in Mao’s revolutionary art due to his early death in 1954, and despite the overwhelming influence of Soviet art, rather than classical or modernist European art, in China at that time.

Lin Fengmian’s modernism and Xu’s symbolic realism were still elite forms of art, but the art of the left wing shared more of a common outlook with Mao’s art project. The left-wingers were clearly influenced by Russia’s proletarian artistic thinking. They fiercely criticized the work of Lin Fengmian and other modernists as a type of decadent bourgeois and individualistic moaning. At the time, these radical youths came closest to representing the spirit of Yan’an, and Lu Xun had the largest appeal among them during the 1930s. Mao called Lu the “The Flag-Bearer of China’s New Cultural Movement” (*xinwenhua yundong de qishou*), and Mao’s attitude toward the leftists was indeed similar to that of the Soviet Union and Italian fascists toward avant-garde and futurist artists during the early days of their revolutions.

However, even though the most radical left-wing artists had organized creative activities for the public (known as “Art for Life”) using woodcut prints under the guidance of Lu Xun, these activities were based on individualism, which had been popular since the May Fourth Movement. The leftists’ popular art still aimed only at “transforming the public,” and demonstrated at most only sympathy toward the proletariat and humanitarian sentiment criticizing social inequalities.



Figure 1.7

Li Qun, *Three Young Victims*, 1935.

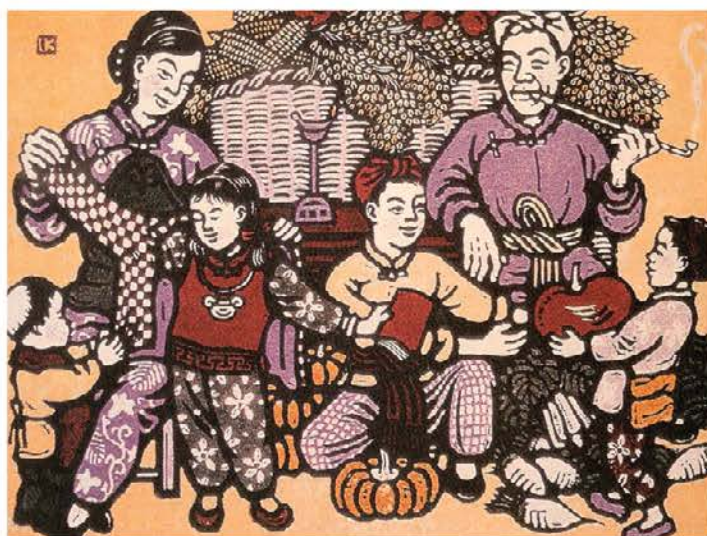


Figure 1.8

Li Qun, *A Painting of Being Well Fed and Well Clothed*, 1944.



Figure 1.9
Yan Han, *Door Guardian*, 1943.

For example, before they arrived in Yan'an, Hu Yi-Chuan, Chen Tiegeng, Wo Zha, and other left-wing fine artists created their woodcut prints with topics related to "proletarian people," although they were not necessarily proletarians themselves. Obviously this did not comply with the criteria of "revolutionary mass art" set forth in Mao's Yan'an Talk, because Mao believed that beyond their proletarian subjects they still held bourgeois worldviews. On the other hand, while the Soviet Union and European fascists had their own classical and traditional realism as their authoritative style, for Mao there was almost no alternative official art form from Chinese culture's own tradition for which to proclaim support. Therefore, Mao could not abandon the radical avant-garde art as quickly as the Soviets had. He had to transform, and take advantage of, the left-wing artists who came to the liberated areas.

The literature and art rectification movement was launched in 1942. It aimed to change the artists' ideologies, and to promote traditional folk art as a way



of remolding their self-expressive styles and approach to art. It should be noted that this transformation was very effective. The promotion of the Yan'an woodcuts worked to increase the artists' interest in folk prints, New Year calendars, and paper-cut forms. The left-wing wood sculptors switched from their original applications of the expressionist style used by Kollwitz in Germany, Masereel in Belgium, and Goncharova and Favorsky and others in the Soviet Union to a folk style of engraved lines. Relatively prominent works in this vein included those created by Li Qun, Luo Gongliu, Wang Shikuo, and Shi Lu. Some artists went so far as to directly substitute the traditional image of the door god with an image of revolutionary soldiers. Such celebratory and "love-to-see-and-hear" (*xiwen lejian*) styles served to popularize their art, but there was a loss of the bracing freedom and critical humanitarian spirit in the woodcut works that were produced during the left-wing era. The plainness of the Yan'an woodcuts, which used the natural style of rural areas, seeded a



Figure 1.10

Door guardian: Dipamkara and Zhao Gongming. One of the traditional models of door guardian made in Zhuxianzhen, Henan province.

vulgarization of art that prospered later. In the Yan'an period, woodcuts applied the abstract language of the early avant-garde to an appreciation of the simplicity and sweetness of the masses that they represented, and an affinity with their perspective. This peasant-derived taste was an important component of Mao's propaganda with a strong nationalist appeal. After 1949, it became increasingly prominent and exaggerated.

From the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Mao's popular art developed from a low-level, immature stage toward a higher-level, more-developed stage exemplifying an early academic style. This development was related to the Chinese artists' learning from the Soviet artists. In the early 1950s, artists from the Soviet Union and China visited each other frequently to exchange ideas and exhibit their work. From 1953 to 1956, a total

of twenty-six important Chinese artists studied at the Repin Academy of Art, and in 1955 the Soviet painter Makhmork.M (1913–1993) visited Beijing and held a training class in the Chinese Central Academy of Fine Art, where some of China's most promising artists studied during this period.⁴¹

However, the impact of artistic exchange between China and the Soviet Union was really embodied by works created after the late 1950s. During the 1950s, fine art still retained the elementary ingredients of the Yan'an era, while the party's policy toward popular art was further emphasized. New Year paintings were greatly encouraged and developed on a large scale in order to eulogize Mao, the Communist Party, and the new life through which the working people would become masters of the country. The New Year paintings not only took rural folk form but also encompassed significant elements drawn from previous commercial art styles. Jin Meisheng, a New

Figure 1.11

Jin Meisheng, *Vegetables Greening, Melon Fattening, and Yields Highly Increasing*, 1956.

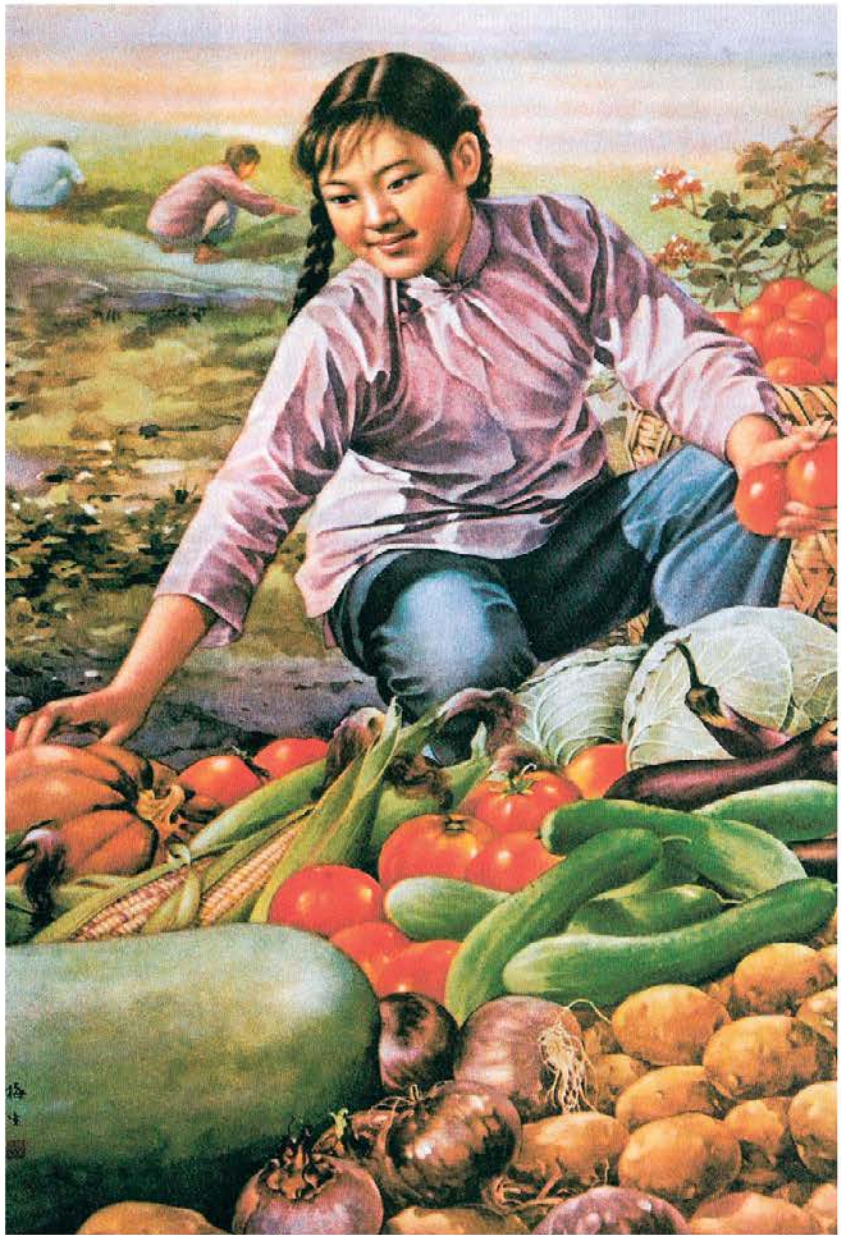




Figure 1.12

Jin Meisheng, *Fengtian Sun Tobacco*
Company Advertisement, circa 1930s.

Year calendar painter in 1930s Shanghai, painted socialist life using the same style, significantly influencing the New Year paintings. This kitsch style was necessary for both commercial culture and socialist popular culture.

From the early 1950s, artists grappled with the problems of how to demonstrate the new life under the Communist Party and how to integrate a distinctly Chinese style with Western realism. Jiang Feng and others advocated transforming traditional Chinese painting through the integration of Western sketching and life drawing techniques. Although some artists who stuck to tradition opposed this idea, many Chinese traditional artists did join in making life drawings. A traditional style of landscape painting that manifested the “industrial landscape” (*gongye shanshui*) of socialist construction became very fashionable. The works of Li Keran, Fu Baoshi,

Shi Lu, and other artists had far-reaching effects during this innovative era. For instance, in his ink painting titled *Beyond the Great Wall* (1954), Shi Lu used the railroad and an invisible oncoming train destroying the Great Wall as a metaphor for the effects of industrialization and socialist modernization on the new nation. The painting also involved another metaphor of the reunification in the form of a Mongolian family gazing at the coming train. Although the Great Wall was a symbol of the past, it was in transition to join the new. A parallel approach can be found in an early oil painting by Dong Xiwen, *Spring Comes to Tibet*, in which a group of Tibetan women watch the coming public bus that connects Tibetan and Han people. Like the railroad in Shi Lu’s painting, the bus was a symbol of modernization. Dong’s other important painting, *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*, took as its



Figure 1.13

Shi Lu, *Beyond The Great Wall*, 1954. National Art Museum of China.



Figure 1.14

Dong Xiwen, *Spring Comes to Tibet*, 1954.



Figure 1.15
Dong Xiwen, *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation* (original version), 1953.

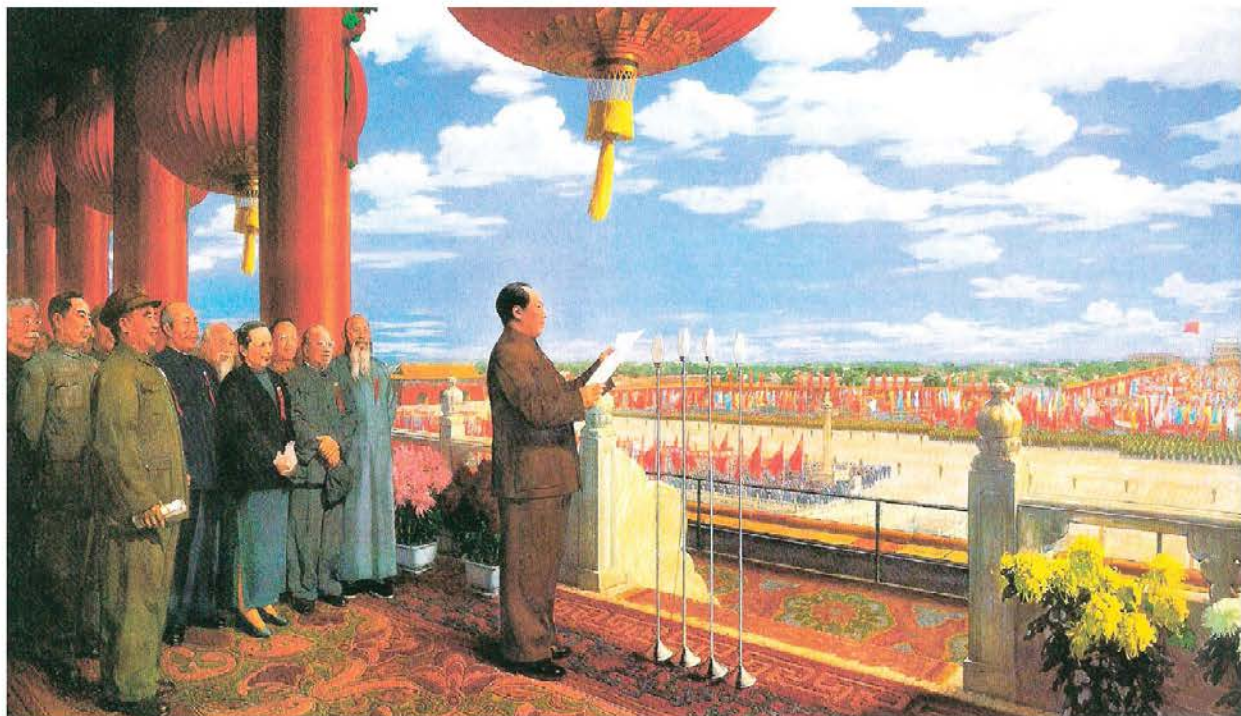


Figure 1.16
Dong Xiwen, *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation* (1972 revised version), 1972.

theme the moment at which the People's Republic of China was founded. This painting later became a historical document bearing witness to political changes embodied in its iconological significance, as the artist revised it four times. Dong was ordered to remove and later reinsert certain high-ranking officials from the central government who were represented in the painting. The officials included such figures as Gao Gang and Rao Shushi, who was executed in the 1950s during a political campaign, and Liu Shaoqi, the chairman of the People's Republic from 1959 to 1966 who died during the Cultural Revolution.⁴²

Regardless of the political subject matter in this painting, the color, composition, and historical topic all reveal the pursuit of an original model of a nationalist style in the early 1950s. Even later, when the Soviet-influenced socialist realist style reached its peak, the art during the early period of the People's Republic of China retained a strong tendency toward nationalism.

In fact, the greatest influence on Chinese artists during the 1950s was not the socialist realism of the Soviet Union but the nineteenth-century Peredvizhniki (often called the Wanderers or the Itinerants), represented by Ilya Repin (1844–1930) and Vasili Surikov (1848–1916). Of course, Chinese artists acquired the knowledge of this school through introductions given by the Soviet Union, which began

to advocate and pay attention to the Peredvizhniki at the beginning of the 1930s. There were several reasons why the Peredvizhniki affected Chinese artists so deeply. First, most Peredvizhniki painters came from the lower class, and so they were inclined to support the view that art should serve the people's needs and align itself with their emotions and sentiments. This was in line with Mao's mass revolution. Secondly, the painters of this school paid attention to national traditions in their choices of both artistic language and topic. Thirdly, in essence they belonged to the school of romantic painting, though for a long time Chinese artists misunderstood them to be part of critical realism. Unlike the previous generation of critical realist artists who specifically exposed the dark side of society and held an elite view of social inequality, the Wanderers expressed their own feelings in the paintings, affirming the multitudes' hopes for the future by depicting their daily lives. Fourthly, their skillful academic techniques were admired and needed by Chinese artists.⁴³ Prior to this time in China, classically trained academic artists such as Xu Beihong, Wu Zuoren, and others had studied in France, but they were quite few in number and did not have a major impact on art during this period. While artists did not have the opportunity to view European academicism directly, they could learn some aspects of it from the Wanderers. This



Figure 1.17

Ilya Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga (The Volga Boatmen)*, 1870–1873.

accumulation of academic skills, as well as a romantic approach, paved the way for the advancement and refinement of Mao's art in the late 1950s and the first half of 1960s.

At the time of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, in a burst of nationalism Mao brought forward the slogan "Combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism" to replace "Socialist realism." This had two implications. First, it reflected Mao's nationalist consciousness and his intention of distinguishing China from the Soviet Union. In fact, this tendency had previously been disclosed. For example, in 1956 Lu Dingyi, the head of the Propaganda Department, had stressed an opposition to national nihilism and wholesale Westernization, which, in the context of the 1950s, was a term used to warn artists not to unquestioningly follow the example set by the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ Secondly, it reflected Mao's more romantic and utopian approach to proletarian art, as differentiated from the art of any other national ideology.

It is very clear that Mao's ultimate and ideal model was an art that combined a nationalist style and a peasant's taste against elite expressionism and academic style. However, art practice from the late 1950s to 1966 seemed oriented in opposition to Mao's ideas, especially after the important political changes incurred when Mao resigned as national chairman and Liu Shaoqi, the number two figure in Mao's government, took the position in 1959. The change was a result of the failure of Mao's Great Leap Forward policy in 1958. In comparison with Mao's radical revolutionary sentiment, Liu was more realistic, possessing a more constructive and professional approach to national affairs. Under Chairman Liu's leadership, art moved toward a more academic socialist model. A number of the finest Maoist popular artworks created in this style appeared between 1958 and 1964, after several years of Sovietization. These works depicted romantic and symbolic themes with academic realist techniques. For example, works portraying the manifestation of heroism include Zhan Jianjun's oil painting *Five Warriors on Langya Mountain*, Quan Shanshi's *Heroic and Indomitable*, and Hou Yimin's *Liu Shaoqi on the Road to Anyuan*. These works, by artists who were trained either in the Soviet Union or under



Figure 1.18
Zhan Jianjun, *Five Warriors on Langya Mountain*, 1959.

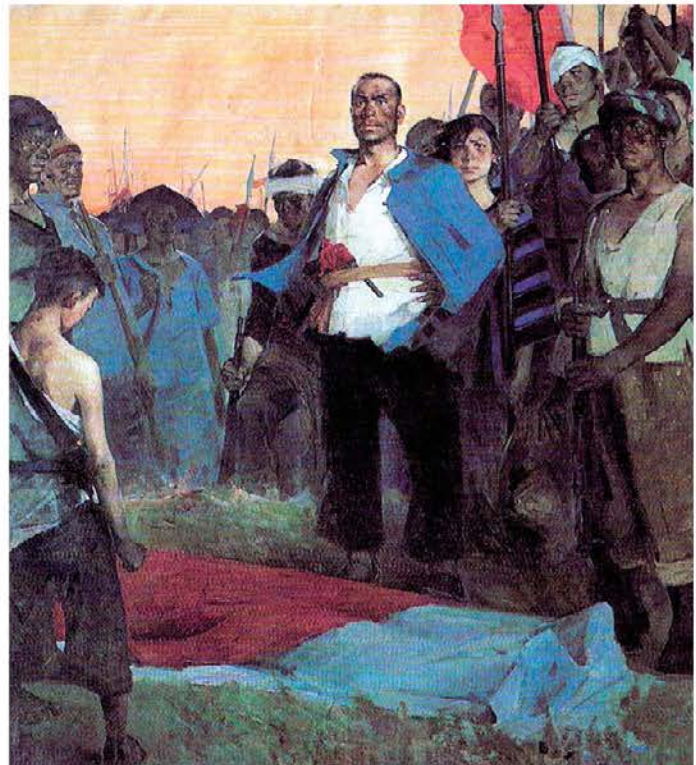


Figure 1.19
Quan Shanshi, *Heroic and Indomitable*, 1961.



Figure 1.20

Hou Yimin, *Liu Shaoqi on the Road to Anyuan*, 1962.

Soviet artists in the 1950s, produced a number of what I call “academic socialist realist works” (*xueyuan shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi*). Their styles were quite different from the simple narration of Yan’an woodcuts and the works sometimes called *tu youhua* (folk oil paintings) produced in the early 1950s by artists such as Dong Xiwen.

The “folk oils,” however, continued to be made, commonly reflecting the people’s happy lives and usually focusing on peasant topics. The large clay sculpture *Rental Collection Yard* that appeared during this period also highlighted conflicts and performances in the class struggle drama, but it was cast with academic realistic techniques that had never been achieved before. Sun Zixi’s *In Front of Tian’anmen* is another such piece. Works with a

monumental symbolic significance were gradually replacing plotted storylines. (This revolutionary romanticism was later replaced by the pop painting of the 1990s. In Wang Jinsong’s *Take a Picture in Front of Tian’anmen*, for example, the symbol of the fatherland with Mao’s official portrait on it, the Tian’anmen Gate in the socialist realist painting, turns to a tourist site for Chinese businessmen. The people in both paintings are smiling, but their mentality has changed sharply.)

However, the literature and art rectification movement that began in 1963 appeared to interrupt this peak of “aesthetic socialist realism.” In terms of cultural ideology, this reflected the final confrontation between the concepts of Maoist mass art and 1930s left-wing literature and art. Within a period of just



Figure 1.21

The large clay sculpture *Rental Collection Yard*, 1964.





Figure 1.22
Sun Zixi, *In Front of Tian'anmen*, 1964.



Figure 1.23
Wang Jinsong, *Take a Picture in Front of Tian'anmen*, 1992.

over ten years, from 1953 to 1964, Mao had launched several political and literary rectification movements to criticize and remove some intellectuals, including some well-known representatives of the 1930s left-wing literature and art. They were punished because, despite their efforts to accommodate Mao, these leftists could not leave out of account the “autonomy of art” and the construction of superior professional art, in contradiction to Mao’s theory that art would serve as a tool to reflect the thoughts of the masses.

With extreme dissatisfaction, Mao finally launched the Cultural Revolution against Liu’s “capitalist headquarters” (*zichanjieji silingbu*) with the goal of “liquidating seventeen years [from 1949 to 1966]” (*pipan shiqinian*). Mao entirely negated the direction of the Cultural Ministry, as signaled by its new name, the Ministry of Bel-esprit and Beauty (*Caizi jiaren bu*), given by Mao himself.

For more than twenty years, from the 1940s to 1960s, Mao had undertaken a campaign of rectification to reeducate the leftists, or the early avant-gardists, but it ended with frustration and disappointment. In 1966, he finally abandoned the then-avant-garde artists and their followers while launching a broader revolutionary proletarian cultural revolution. At this point, history returned to the original thesis of the “revolutionary masses” or “red pop” from the Yan’an Talk. The difference was that the proletarian masses were no longer the objects served by art; instead they became the masters of art. Workers and peasants could themselves be artists, as exemplified by Luda and Yangquan’s workers’ art and Huxian county peasants’ pictures. In giving the lower classes a right not only to appreciate art but also to have their own discourse in the creation and interpretation of art, Mao thus turned down any modern or postmodern theory of popular culture. This revolution was not a pure grassroots phenomenon, but rather a movement promoted by the authorities in the form of the Leading Group of the Cultural Revolution (*Wenhua geming lingdao xiaozu*).

Of course, the glory of being a master was actually only the glory of serving as bricks and rocks for Mao’s utopian mansion. Jiang Qing tried to create an original form of Mao’s revolutionary mass art, and she therefore negated all traditions. Extreme

pragmatism built on radical nihilism was one of the distinguishing characteristics of art during the Cultural Revolution. Although Jiang Qing opposed blindly worshipping foreign things, to some extent the form of paintings exhibited during the Cultural Revolution was more formally Westernized than in any previous era.

The Real “Return of the Real”?

Visual art produced during the Cultural Revolution therefore completely negated the privileges of the elite and sent the privileged masters down. Art had maximized its social and political functions. Mass media were applied on the greatest scale, including the use of broadcasting, film, music, dance, bulletins, and cartoons; even medals, flags, and the big-character posters all heralded the new art of proletarian vanguard. Visual art produced during the Cultural Revolution was no longer only a single form of fine art classified in the conventional sense under different categories of media and concepts, but a comprehensive popular art that had never existed in the past. This was due to the fact that the art makers were total amateurs—students, peasants, and workers. The display spaces were on the streets and in other public spaces. This artwork is perhaps an extreme example of the site-specific, which is the most typical postmodern form in the West, exemplifying what art critic Hal Foster called the “return of the real”—real site, real moment, and real environment in daily life.⁴⁵ Though Mao’s site specificity was political, conceptually there had never been such a popular art in the world before Mao. This was the case not only because the art of the Cultural Revolution revealed life during the Cultural Revolution as an integral whole, but also because the art involved the masses in its making. In this way, Mao’s art thoroughly transcended Soviet art, postmodernist art, and any commercial art in terms of the population of receivers, the scale of form, and the range of producers.

Visual art of the Cultural Revolution era, therefore, was never confined within the specialist’s domain of individual art-making; rather, it was developed to the greatest extent in every corner of people’s daily lives. The effect of publicity produced



Figure 1.24

Li Fenglan (a peasant painter from Huxian county),
Spring Hoeing, 1973.

Figure 1.25

Wang Yingchun, *Digging the Mountain Endlessly*, 1973.





Figure 1.26

Anonymous, *Take Brushes as Arms*, photograph, 1966.



Figure 1.27

Red Guards preparing to burn the Everlasting-Exemplary-Virtue Board of a Confucian temple, 1966.

Figure 1.28

Students mounting posters on the campus of Beijing University, 1966.



through the use of medals, logos, posters, and performances during the Cultural Revolution could be compared to any commercial advertising in the United States. The visual impact and spiritual political propaganda effected by this artwork during the Cultural Revolution far surpassed the sensational way in which people in the contemporary Western world adore commercial media and stars. However, Maoist propaganda and commercial media were all wholesale products of the people, and as such represented the true reality of the revolutionary society. In comparison with commercial products, as well as with the conceptual work made by postmodernist artists, the so-called “true reality” in people’s eyes and minds in fact has ceased to exist, while mass media have become the “true reality” in a virtual and mechanical way, which in turn is creating, changing, and shaping our true reality.

Visual art produced during the Cultural Revolution went far beyond the scope of socialist realism. It created the unique “red pop” campaign in China. Its extraordinary forms make it impossible to classify by any conventional artistic concepts. The features of “red pop” mentioned above are similar to the concepts of today’s postmodernist Western art, but the intrinsic difference is that Mao’s pop aimed to return art to the mass revolution, to life itself, whereas Western postmodernism attempts to address the issue of identity and political life by artistic representation.

The “red pop” phenomenon was mostly concentrated during the earlier part of the Cultural Revolution, in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s, particularly after the commemorative exhibition “Thirty-Year Anniversary of the Yan’an Talk” in the National Art Museum of China in 1972, art returned to the earlier aesthetic socialist realist style with an overemphasis on state ideological art clichés such as the idolization of leaders, glorification of history, and the happy life. This is the ultimate destination of Mao’s revolutionary art, because it needs models and gods, which function as a visual Bible or *Jing Tu Bian* (a Paradise or Pure Land in the Buddhist world). Thus Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, launched a campaign to promote the arts of the Cultural Revolution with the principle of the creation of art as “Three Prominences” (*San Tu Chu*), “High, Great,

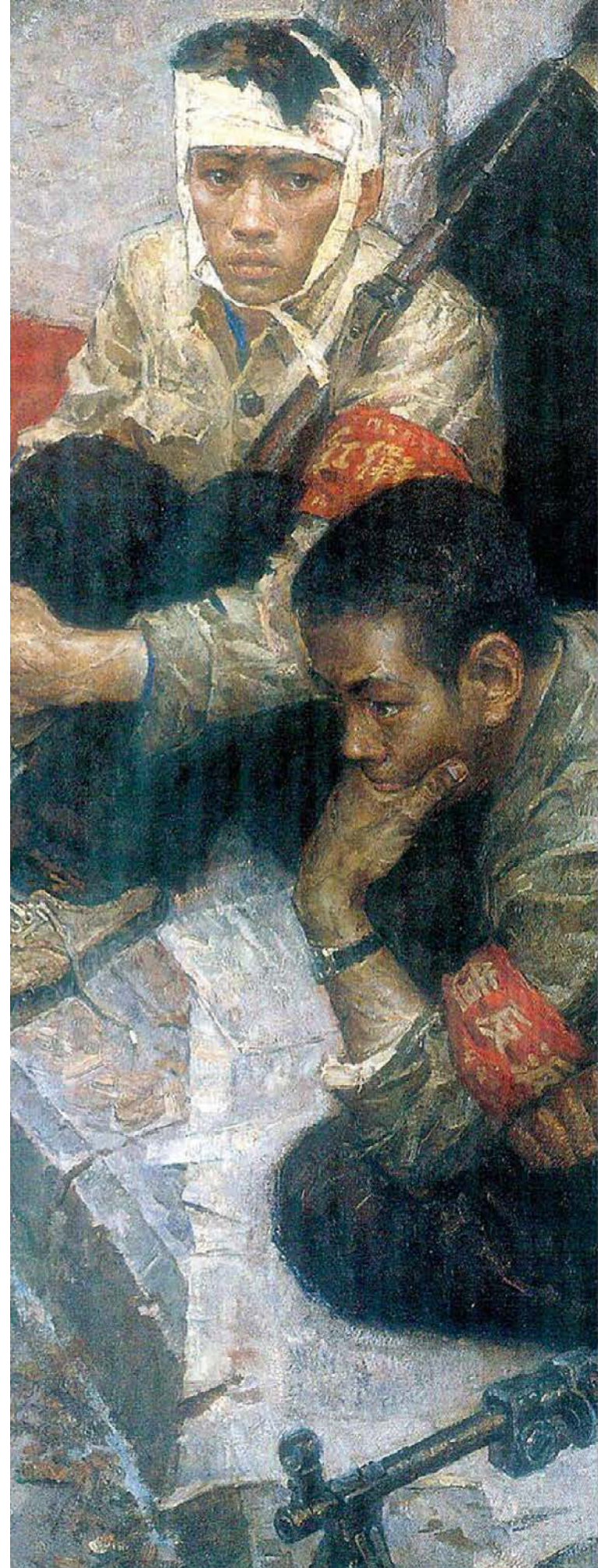
and Full” (*Gao Da Quan*), and “Red, Light, Bright” (*Hong Guang Liang*). In this way, Mao’s mode of “combining revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism,” initiated in the 1950s, was moving in the direction of ultimate ideological symbolism. The previous core of the revolutionary proletarian avant-garde that used to attract the early leftists was completely lost. The complete course of Maoist popular art had finally reached its peak around the time of his death.

Mao’s mass art developed pragmatically on the basis of the thorough nihilism that intended to destroy almost any tradition, whether Chinese or Western, with the exception of a few folk art forms, under the name and practice of modernity and revolution. For instance, the eight models of Beijing operas were called *bage xiandai yangban xi*, or “eight models of modern Beijing opera,” and a reformed Beijing opera was combined with a Western symphony. The revolutionary discourse of Mao’s art has continued to make an impact on the Chinese contemporary art of the last three decades; even though its revolutionary themes have vanished, its revolutionary ideology still remains in these avant-gardists’ mentalities. In the decade following the Cultural Revolution, all new art targeted Mao’s ideology and political art, but moved in different directions—social critique in academic realism, art for art’s sake, or directly demonstrating for freedom against authoritarian oppression. However, the art made during the post-Cultural Revolution period was still a byproduct of the Cultural Revolution, for it never was able to get far away from the political target, even when it pursued Western modernist forms or changed political subject matter in a neoacademic realistic style. The ’85 Movement, however, initiated a new avant-garde mentality, attempting to depart from Mao and return to the early avant-garde in the sense of positing an intellectual critique of society and pursuing cultural modernity. On the other hand, it also inherited Mao’s radicalism in the sense of breaking down boundaries between art and daily life and pursuing true involvement in daily life.

It is this position that makes the Chinese avant-garde different from the Western avant-garde in a political sense. In his book *The Return of the Real*, Foster names two political avant-gardes in twentieth-

century Western art. The first took the position of resistance to art institutions, while the second attempted to imitate institutions with a methodology of cynicism, appropriation, and allegory. The first is modernist, or what is commonly called the historical avant-garde, and the latter is postmodernist, or neo-avant-garde.

In the Chinese context, however, “the political” means something entirely different, for “the political” is always present in daily life; therefore it is not necessary to consider whether an avant-garde is anti- or pro-institution, for the political is life itself and is also always being institutionalized. Consequently, the Chinese avant-garde needs to form a revolution within the institutional system rather than without. It is this mentality that framed both Mao’s revolutionary art and that of the cultural avant-garde in twentieth-century China. Is this a “*real* return of the real”? Or does it perhaps more precisely fit the original Saint-Simonian meaning of “avant-garde”?



Academicism and the Amateur Avant-Garde in the Post-Cultural Revolution Period (1979–1984)

To a certain degree, it was Mao's revolutionary pop art that halted the experimental practice of the cultural avant-garde of the early twentieth century. The total modernity and cultural avant-garde projects initiated by the May Fourth Movement were also exaggerated by Mao's Cultural Revolution. The synthesis of religion, science, and art represented by the first generation of Chinese intellectuals and artists was replaced by Mao's total revolution, which was oriented toward increased scrutiny and various kinds of cultural rectification. Mao's ambitious and utopian project ended with his death in 1976.

It was not until two years after that important moment, however, that the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution would allow any new activity to appear in the Chinese art world. A revival of the cultural avant-garde did not fully emerge until the mid-1980s. From a political point of view, public commissions generated around the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1977 and 1978, continued the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and simply substituted the icons of China's new leaders, such as Hua Guofeng, for those of the old.

New Chinese art activities began to appear after several crucial changes in the Chinese political and cultural situation took place. In 1978, Beijing held a national congress to consider the mistakes made by Mao and the zealots of the Cultural Revolution. The policy of opening to the West followed, along with the slogan "Seek truth from facts" (*Shishi qishi*). These circumstances encouraged people to express their long-suppressed desires to explore new art forms and to satisfy their demand for self-expression. In 1979, new art groups and painting trends began to emerge.

Trends in art developed along with those in other areas of intellectual activity. Between 1978 and 1980,

newspapers and magazines published many articles based on interpretations of Deng Xiaoping's slogan, "Practice is the only measure of truth" (*Shijian shi jinayan zhenli de weiyi biao zhun*). The idea that truth was no more than a hypervalidated practical reality caused Chinese people, who were disillusioned by the Cultural Revolution, to shift their values to pragmatism and individualism. Beginning in about 1981, philosophers began discussing questions of humanism and alienation.¹ This discussion was initiated by renewed research on Karl Marx's 1844 "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts." It used Marx's theory, developed in his youth, criticizing alienation and emphasizing humanism, to indirectly criticize the suppression of human nature in Mao's period, in particular during the Cultural Revolution. This discussion reached an important climax in 1983; the simultaneous philosophical debates promoted an awareness among Chinese people of the need to develop a modern and progressive society to accompany the planned economic development. These debates touched on human values, the humanist philosophical position, human dignity, human rights, and finally, human freedom.

Conservatives within the Communist Party immediately counterattacked by initiating the political campaign against spiritual pollution (*fan jingshen wuran*) in 1983. In the art world, the first cultural rectification was launched to criticize self-expression and the influence of modern, Western abstract art. Ultimately, 1984 was contemporary Chinese art's most dismal time. The Sixth National Art Exhibition was very backward-looking, and there were no official activities of new art taking place except one avant-garde exhibition, held in Lanzhou, Gansu province. The campaign of suppression, along