

The “China/Avant-Garde” Exhibition of 1989

From February 5 to 19, 1989, the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition took place in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. This was just two months before the beginning of the Tian’anmen Square student democratic movement, and four months before the governmental shutdown of the movement on June 4, 1989. As the principal curator of the exhibition, I was involved in the entire three-year preparatory process, including garnering sponsorship, negotiating with officials, fundraising, and chairing the organizational committee, among other duties.¹

In recent years, I have done a number of projects in China, including organizing the twentieth-anniversary show commemorating the original 1989 “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition. These past years have witnessed a rebirth of idealism with a new critical approach engaged in both social and aesthetic arenas. This rebirth of idealism was the primary impetus driving me and my team to undertake the organization of the anniversary show commemorating the original historical events.

I scheduled the 2009 show and events to take place on the same day in February as the original “China/Avant-Garde” opening. However, the police gave notice of cancellation to us in person, just the night before the opening day of the anniversary events. This closing actually repeated the events that happened twenty years ago with the original “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition. This reminds all Chinese artists and intellectuals that the growth of industrial modernity has not resulted in much change within the Chinese political system. Chinese modernity has a long way to go in terms of reform and democracy.

With frustration and anger, I made a declaration of protest to the public on February 5, 2009,

at 3:00 p.m. outside the National Agricultural Exhibition Center (*Quanguo nongye zhanlanguan*), the designated time and place for the opening of the events and exhibition. Many artists who had participated in the 1989 “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition were available on the scheduled opening day, and they attended my declaration. The complete words of the declaration were as follows:

A Declaration of Protest

Late at night on February 4, 2009, the Public Security Bureau of Chaoyang District in Beijing notified the Organizing Committee of the Twentieth Anniversary of the “China/Avant-Garde” Exhibition that the commemorative event, which was to be held at the Beijing National Agricultural Exhibition Center on February 5, at 3 p.m., must be canceled. No legal basis for the provision was provided.

As the head of the Organizational Committee of the “China/Avant-Garde” Exhibition in 1989, and the Chief Consultant and Curator of the current commemorative events, I would like to lodge a strong protest to the Public Security Bureau of Chaoyang District in Beijing. These commemorative events are legitimate cultural practices, conducted within the bounds of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China. The Organizer and the working team have committed tremendous time, resources, and energy to launch these events. Members from the art and cultural communities as well as the general public are ready to participate. Without any prior consultation and communication, the Public Security Bureau of Chaoyang District arbitrarily issued an order to forbid our events—such action is an utter violation of the constitution and a blatant transgression of our civil rights. I am deeply indignant at such enforcement and would reserve my right to take further legal actions.

Gao Minglu,

Early morning of February 5, 2009



Figure 4.1

Gao Minglu, principal curator of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, addressing the public after the police closure because of the gunshots, February 5, 1989. Photograph provided by A Zhen.



Figure 4.2

Gao Minglu, the principal curator, reading his declaration, "Protest," in front of the public in the plaza of the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, February 5, 2009. Photograph provided by Yang Zhilin.

The cancellation brought the enthusiasm of 1989 back to the artists, along with cause for reflection upon China's current art scene and its methods and theories. What we most miss from the days of the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition is the belief that art is made not only for the art community itself, nor for the market and biennial exhibitions, but rather for a broader social purpose, and that it should be exhibited in a public environment, accessible by all. Artistic practice means creating something more significant than just an art object. Above all, it is a means of enlightenment. This is the legacy of the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" show.

However, there is still a certain amount of confusion about the original exhibition, as only a few people, and then only rarely, can get firsthand information about it. First, it was not merely an exhibition in an interior gallery space that was twice shut down by the officials (as most people know). It had a difficult curatorial history and it turned into a great social space mirroring the politics, economy, and culture of the period. Although the exhibition involved the efforts of many artists, critics, and scholars, I am the only one who went through every stage from the beginning to the end and had contact with all the various circles of society with whom we engaged, such as officials, police, businessmen, leaders of state-owned enterprises, intellectuals, dissidents, writers, artists, and critics. The exhibition can be seen as a total durational event on a stage enacting a play of social happenings. Second, the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" show's sensational results overshadowed its historical and aesthetic details, such as its curatorial approach and its display methodology and structure, among other things. Few people know how many artists and works were included in the show, and many are confused as to how many times it was shut down. Some say three times, some one time. Finally, people may appreciate only its social significance but easily overlook its conceptual side. Almost none of the artworks were paid adequate attention and received critical discussion, with the exception of a few performance works, which may have been overpoliticized under the particular circumstance of late 1989. Even the most sensational two gunshots by Xiao Lu were not analyzed nor understood properly, due to the media attention surrounding

抗議書
2009年2月4日深夜，北京朝阳区公安局通知“中国现代艺术展20周年组委会”取消原定2月5日下午3时在北京农展馆展览馆举办的纪念活动，没有出示任何法律依据条文。

我作为1989年中国现代艺术展组织者筹备委员会的负责人，以及此次纪念活动的总顾问及策展人，向北京市朝阳区公安局提出了强烈抗议！我们的纪念活动为中华人民共和国宪法允许的正常文化活动。主办方和我们的团队投入了大量的时间、物力和精力组织该次活动。艺术家、文化人士及观众都已准备前来参加纪念活动，而北京朝阳区公安局不经协商，武断下令禁止我们的活动，完全是违反宪法，粗暴干涉公民权利的行为。对此我深表愤恨，并将保持法律申诉的权利。
高志洪 2009年2月5日凌晨

Figure 4.3

The original copy of the declaration.

their public effect. Xiao Lu's two gunshots were not only significant actions in the public sphere, but also enactments of the ambiguity between a female individual's experience and the public interpretation thereof. It was this dislocation between public and private that made her gunshots and installation the most controversial artwork in the exhibition. Her conceptual framework and approach involved the old generation of socialist realism, her emotional state, and her attitude toward the environment of urban modernity. The interpretation of her work, however, still remains incomplete, as it has hitherto been based on a superficial, dichotomy-ridden perspective (national versus personal, political versus artistic).

An Aborted Exhibition Plan in 1987

The flourishing '85 Movement impacted the conservative status quo and brought fresh air into the contemporary Chinese art world. Some open-minded, middle-aged academic painters organized an official meeting called the National Oil Painting Conference, which took place in Beijing in April 1986. Major academic painters from across the nation participated. More significantly, considering the open policy and my suggestion, the organizers also invited some leading artists of the avant-garde groups, such as Shu Qun, Zhang Peili, Li Shan, and others, to join the meeting and have a dialogue with the academic painters. I was invited to give a lecture at the conference, and I spoke on "The '85 Art Movement" ("Bawu meishu yundong"), giving a general view of the groups and discussing their art ideas, activities, and artworks; about 300 slides were shown. The lecture, and especially the showing of the slides, was a convenient and effective means to give an overview of the '85 Movement. Furthermore, it inspired the participating avant-garde artists. During the meeting, I discussed with Shu Qun, Zhang Peili, and Li Shan the possibility of having a nationwide slide show in Guangdong. The idea for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was initiated, then a public announcement was made during the Zhuhai Conference from August 15 to 19, 1986.

At the time, Wang Guangyi, the leading figure of the Northern Art Group and rationalist painting, had just moved to Zhuhai Academy of Painting (*Zhuhai*

huayuan), an institution located in the Zhuhai Special Economic Zone. As it was a new territory and a new school, it was ambitious and motivated to host a national event to expand its profile. Wang Guangyi and Shu Qun came to Beijing to see me and we made a plan for the conference. I finally convinced the Zhuhai Academy of Painting, with the publisher and organizers of *Zhongguo meishubao* in Beijing as cosponsors, to organize the slide exhibition.² In August 1986, the first large-scale semiofficial conference of the '85 art movement, entitled the "Zhuhai '85 New Wave Large-Scale Slide Exhibition" ("Zhuhai bawu meishu sichao daxing huandengzhan"), was held in Zhuhai. Representatives from avant-garde groups and critics from all over China attended the event. The organizing committee of the exhibition, led by myself, received about 1,200 slides sent by groups from across the nation. From these, 342 works from 31 groups were selected and displayed in the show.³ The most important outcome of the meeting was the decision to organize a large-scale exhibition of Chinese avant-garde art.

After the Zhuhai conference, I began to try to convince an influential official institution to be a sponsor for organizing an avant-garde exhibition. In China during the 1980s, no exhibition, whether a group show or solo show, could be held without an official unit as a sponsor. No official units, however, wanted to take the risk and be a sponsor for the exhibition. Even the respected Chinese art journal *Zhongguo meishubao*, which had originally promised to do so, gave up due to political pressure. After failing to find an official sponsor, I, along with some art critics, in particular Zhu Qingsheng, a young teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Art, and Liu Xiaochun, the chief editor of *Zhongguo meishubao*, became aware that we needed to found our own organizations. After some preparatory work in November, the Chinese Modern Art Research Society (*Zhongguo xiandaiyishu yanjiuhui*), a self-organized association of about thirty critics from all over the nation, was founded in Beijing, in part as a planning mechanism for an avant-garde exhibition.⁴

Helped by the Beijing Young Painters Society, I worked out an exhibition space and signed a contract with the National Agricultural Exhibition Center on January 7, 1987. The exhibition was planned to

open on July 15, 1987.⁵ The reasons for choosing the National Agricultural Exhibition Center as the site were, first, that the Ministry of Culture could not control it, and second, that it had an open-minded vice-director, Wei Tongxian, who had graduated from the Central Academy of Graphic Art in Beijing in the 1960s and who supported the avant-garde exhibition. Furthermore, it had great gallery space and the building itself had been named one of the Ten Great Constructions (*Shida jianzhu*) during the Soviet-influenced period of the 1950s.

With this news, I sent a letter to the representatives of the avant-garde groups nationwide to invite them to come to Beijing for a meeting.⁶ On March 25 and 26, 1987, the first exhibition planning meeting was held in Beijing, and about twenty artists from some of the major avant-garde groups gathered there.⁷ Lacking a secure meeting place, the meeting site was moved from place to place, even meeting once, during the winter, in a cluttered courtyard used primarily for storage. This was done largely as a result of the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign, a hard-line political movement being conducted at the time. Student demonstrations were staged in a number of Chinese cities in late 1986. Authorities responded with a campaign against “bourgeois liberalism,” targeting all new political and cultural thought. The campaign continued through mid-1988, significantly hampering the activities of the avant-garde. Facing political pressure, however, all the artists and critics who joined the meeting decided the exhibition would still be opened in the middle of July, in the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, under the title of the “Academic Exchange Exhibition for Nationwide Young Artists” (“Gedi qingnian meishujia xueshu jiaoliuzhan”).⁸ The title avoided radical terms like “avant-garde,” “modern,” and so on, which would have been insulting and a red flag to political officials.

On April 4, 1987, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued an official document prohibiting any professional associations from holding scholarly activities with a national scope. In response, the Chinese Artists Association, an official organization under the Communist Party, immediately contacted me, making a clear statement and issuing an order to cease preparing the avant-garde exhibition for the



Figure 4.4

A meeting during the “Zhuhai ‘85 New Wave Large-Scale Slide Exhibition and Conference.” From the left are Li Shan, Fei Dawei, Gao Minglu (speaking), Liu Xiaochun, Zhu Qingsheng, Peng De, and Pi Daojian.



Figure 4.5

National Agricultural Exhibition Center, Beijing.

您好！经过初步筹备，拟在今年7月15日至30日在北京举办一个各地青年艺术家群体交流联展。目前，场地已定。但是有关展览的组织、作品遴选工作，特别是展览经费问题，仍然没有落实下来。鉴于此，故请您或您所联系的青年（地区）派一位代表来京，于3月25、26两天商讨展览事宜。若奉内容为：

一、展览的宗旨和~~组织~~组织工作。
二、经费。这个展览~~为民间~~自筹资金的形式举办，因此，主要得依靠各地同行解决展览费用。你们能否解决？解决多少？

三、对展览有何打算及建议？并准备得怎样了？
不论您能否来京，均请尽快函告。并速来京，电话、路费及食宿费均请自理，不包食宿。

展览组织机构成立之前，我暂时负责联系工作。
刘清豪：北京东四八条52号《美术出版社》编辑部 电话：4438911
余不赘言，盼回音。 马名谦 87.3.9
另注：到京如无住所，可直找北京青年画会吴悦林联系。
地址：北京东三环环厂宿舍院内。开会时间3月25日上午9时。

Figure 4.6

The original copy of the letter from Gao Minglu inviting artists from around the nation to come to Beijing for the preparatory meeting for the exhibition.

Figure 4.7

Group photo taken in the yard of the Beijing Youth League after the preparation meeting for the "Academic Exchange Exhibition for Nationwide Young Artists" in the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, March 26, 1987. (The author is sixth from left in the front row.)



National Agricultural Exhibition Center and to break up the Chinese Modern Art Research Society. The result was that the first attempt to hold the exhibition was aborted, although most of the preparatory work had already been completed.

My Negotiation with the National Art Museum of China and Various Officials

In early 1988, the political situation eased. I started again to prepare for the avant-garde exhibition. At that time, when the possibility of having the exhibition in another space in Beijing such as the National Cultural Hall (*Minzu wenhua gong*) also failed, I decided to try for the National Art Museum of China because of its important position and symbolic role, although I knew it would be extremely difficult to get. It is the only national art gallery that shows contemporary art in the official academic sense, and it is directed by the Ministry of Culture. It was built in 1958, the year before the ten-year celebration of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It is one of the so-called Beijing Ten Great Constructions finished at that time. Each Great Construction is a specific symbol of greatness.⁹ For that reason, the National Art Museum is a symbol of the highest authority, and is nationally important in the Chinese art world. All important official art exhibitions are held there, such as all sessions of the National Art Exhibitions, which are held by the Chinese Artists Association and the Ministry of Culture every five years, and some commemorative exhibitions, such as the Exhibition for the Celebration of the Establishment of the People's Republic of China, held in the twentieth, thirtieth, and fortieth anniversary years. Once an individual artist has a show in the National Art Museum, it means that his or her art position has been established and accepted by the official apparatus, the nation's highest art authority.

For this reason alone, it was very important for the avant-garde to use and modify the symbolic image of the National Art Museum, putting a heretical show in the sacred art palace that it had never been able to enter. For the first time, intensive critical activity would be engaging with the National Art Museum, exemplifying the suppressed, skeptical identity of the avant-garde. This would bring about the double

result of challenging authority by a very aggressive means and giving a boost to the development of the avant-garde movement, if it received the expected public attention.

In order to gain the use of the National Art Museum, however, I had to find a legal sponsor, because the National Art Museum does not accept shows lacking official units as sponsors. Because no official units in the art world wanted to take the risk due to the conservative atmosphere at the moment, I shifted my attention outside the field of art for sponsorship. With the help of my colleagues, in particular Liu Dong, an influential young scholar, and Shu Qun, artist and writer and one of the authors of *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986*, the avant-garde exhibition proposal was immediately supported by three major official units led by some influential liberal intellectuals in China, including the editorial committee of Culture: China and the World Series (*Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie*), led by Gan Yang; SDX Joint Publishing Company (*Sanlian shudian*), directed by Shen Changwen; and the Chinese Aesthetic Study Society (*Zhonghua quanguo meixue xuehui*), chaired by Ru Xin. With a proposal stamped with the seals of three famous units in hand, I submitted an application letter and gave a slide presentation to the directors of the National Art Museum in April 1988. Soon after, I received a refusal stating that the National Art Museum could not handle the political and artistic orientation of the exhibition.

In the summer of 1988, the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign seemed almost over. Therefore, the organizational work of the exhibition gained support from four more official units, including *Meishu*, *Zhongguo meishubao*, the Beijing Graphic Art Company (*Beijing gongyi meishu zonggongsi*), and China City Environment (*Zhongguo shirongbao*), as co-organizing sponsors. Support also came from some influential artists of the older generation, such as Wu Zuoren, Liu Kaiqu, Jin Shangyi, and Zhan Jianjun. Carrying the proposal sealed by a total of seven legitimate official units, I applied to the National Art Museum again in September 1988. With no solid reason to refuse, the National Art Museum was forced to accept the proposal, but it established the one condition that I had to get permission from

the Chinese Artists Association, the most legitimate official body in the Chinese art world.

Although some small group shows had appeared in the National Art Museum after the Cultural Revolution, including the Stars in 1980, the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition was to be the first national-scope unofficial exhibition in China since 1949.¹⁰ The most controversial point was that it was a show of artwork done in Western modern and postmodern styles. These art styles and schools have always been considered heretical by the government. Therefore, the exhibition faced the censorship of both the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party and the museums of the Ministry of Culture. The Communist Party’s organization within the art world is the Chinese Artists Association, which is directed by the party’s Propaganda Department. The museums, such as the Imperial Palace Museum and the National Art Museum, are directed by the Ministry of Culture, a large governmental department. Generally, though, the Communist Party has more authority than any other government agencies. Therefore, sometimes the Party will cancel an exhibition plan although the museum may have already accepted the proposal. Furthermore, the possibility of having an avant-garde exhibition accepted by both the Party and the government was dependent on the occurrence of an opportune moment when the government relaxed its control on art policy, comparatively speaking.

I submitted the same proposal to the Department of the Secretary, the leading group within the Chinese Artists Association, and gave a presentation to three high-ranking officials, Ge Weimo, Kan Fenggang, and Dong Xiaoming. Dong was the youngest official among them and was supportive on the matter. With Dong’s help, the officials set up a meeting with me. After a three-hour meeting, the Department of the Secretary of the Chinese Artists Association finally granted permission and signed, sealing the proposal, after I agreed to accept the conditions given by the officials.¹¹ The Department of the Secretary demanded that three types of artworks not be allowed in the exhibition: those that were opposed to the Communist Party and the Four Fundamental Principles (*Sixiang jiben yuanze*), those that included pornographic images (interpreted as any display of sexuality), and those that were *xingwei yishu*, literally

“behavior art,” or action/performance art.¹² The first two restrictions were abstract and symbolic, not substantial, but it was difficult for me to accept the third one. In the ’85 Movement, performance art was extremely important as a mode of directly venting individual free thought and long-suppressed intuitive feeling. The reason for this prohibition was the fact that performances commonly and unpredictably took place in public spaces. To the authorities it would seem easy for a performance to be transformed into a political event, such as a demonstration.

In order to achieve the goal that the avant-garde exhibition should take place in the National Art Museum, I made a compromise and accepted these conditions, but insisted on having performance art present in the form of documentaries. This time the officials made a compromise as well and signed the proposal under the seals of the sponsors, saying in essence: We hereby agree that *Art Monthly* [the official journal of Chinese Artists Association] be involved as the sponsor of “China Modern Art Exhibition,” and we expect sufficient support from the National Art Museum.¹³

Since it had the approval of the Chinese Artists Association, the National Art Museum was forced to accept the exhibition plan, but deliberately chose for it an unpopular date: the period of Chinese New Year. The opening day would be the eve of the Chinese New Year, when the Chinese people are usually at family gatherings rather than joining in any public activity. Nonetheless, there was no choice for me: the only way was to accept the harsh terms.

On September 17, 1988, I organized a meeting at which all the sponsors and their representatives formed the Chinese Modern Art Exhibition Organizational Committee (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan choubei weiyuanhui*). The committee consisted of fourteen members who were active scholars and art critics in the Chinese contemporary cultural world. I was the head of the committee (*choubei weiyuanhui fuzeren*), or principal curator. At the time, in 1988, there was no such term such as *cehuaren* or “curator” in the Chinese art world. The *fuzeren*, or “head” of the organizational committee, was equivalent to the principal curator in today’s international manner; and the organizational committee was similar to today’s

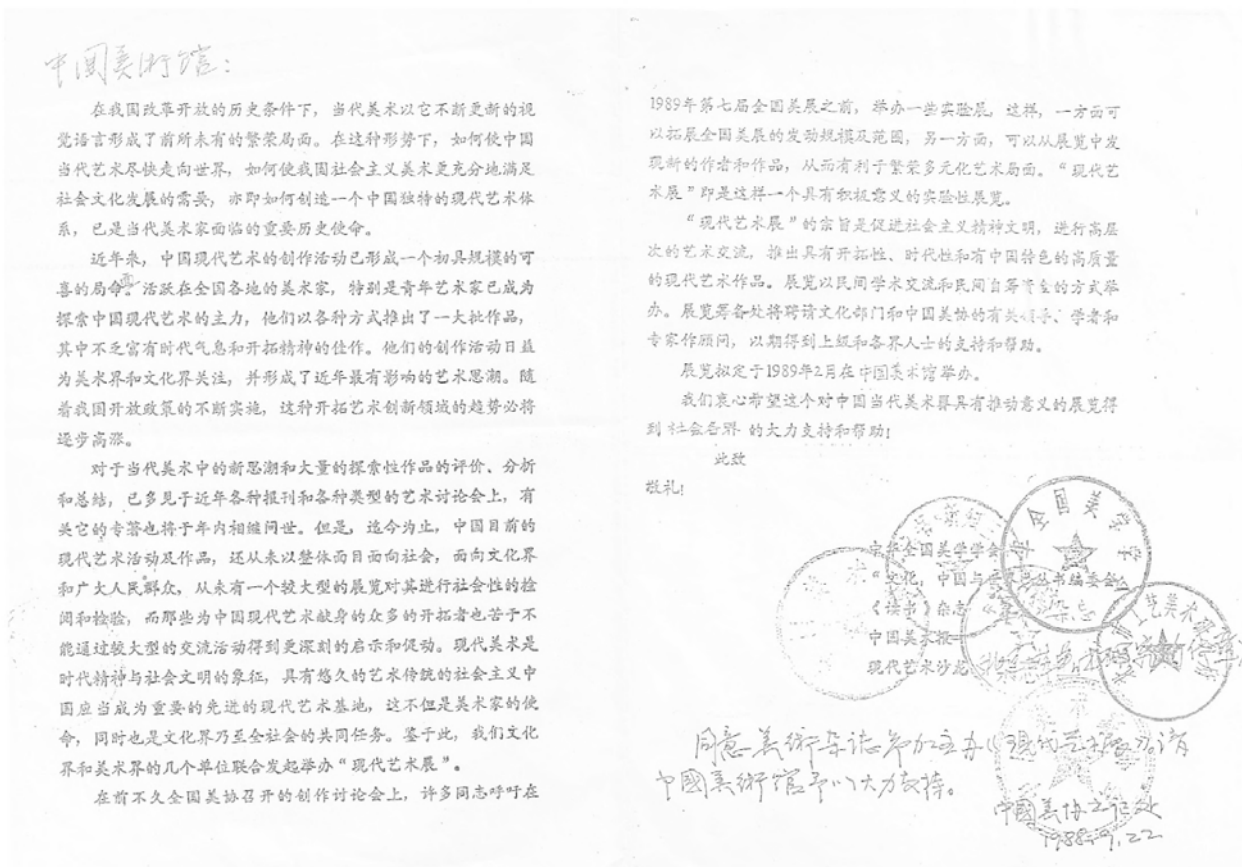


Figure 4.8

The proposal for the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, with official signature and sponsors’ seals.

curatorial team. Among the committee members, Li Xianting, the editor of *Zhongguo meishubao*, was in charge of exhibition space design (*zhanting sheji*), and Zhou Yan, a teacher from the Central Academy of Fine Art, was in charge of scholarly activities, such as conference and catalogue. Fan Di'an, Wang Mingxian, Tang Qingnian, Fei Dawei, and Hou Hanru all were young critics who were taking various roles on the team.

On the same day, the committee released a public announcement with information on the founding of the committee and details about the show, which was later published in *Zhongguo meishubao* as the following:

Preparation Notice for "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition, No. 1

1. It has been decided that a China Art Show will be held from February 7 to 20 at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.

2. The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition will exhibit for the first time featured artworks made with modern concepts and in the modern spirit to the art world in both China and internationally, as well as to

the general public. The show will also reflect the art movement and avant-garde explorations in the past few years that are being debated and evaluated in art circles, and the value and significance of modern art in the development of Chinese culture. As a high-powered exchange and research event in the field of modern art, the show will boost the development of art pluralism in the Chinese art world.

3. The sponsors of the exhibition are: the Editorial Board of Culture: China and the World Series, the All-China Aesthetic Association, *Meishu, Zhongguo meishubao*, *Reading Magazine (Dushu)*, and Modern Art Salon. Preparation work, which has been approved by the Chinese Artists Association and the National Art Museum of China, will be assumed by the Organizational Committee of the exhibition.

4. The exhibition will collect works nationwide. All entries must demonstrate the established artistic concept of the artist bearing his/her individual character, modernity and novel visual form. Those who want to participate must submit photos, slides, a design plan, titles, sizes of their works, plus their installation requirements and résumés to the Organizational Committee for appraisal no later than



Figure 4.9

"Preparation Notice for 'China/Avant-Garde' Exhibition, No. 1," published in *Zhongguo meishubao* (right column), October 31, 1988.

February 1. (Slides must be able to go through plate making and will not be returned. The width of single pieces cannot exceed 2 meters. Send all materials to Ms. Qin Wenna, Qianhai Xijie 17, China Academy of Arts, *Fine Art in China*, Beijing, 100009, China.)

5. The Appraisal Committee will, apart from the members of the Preparatory Committee, also be composed of officials, experts, and scholars.

6. The advisers of the show are: Ru Xin, Li Zehou, Liu Kaiqu, Wu Zuoren, Shen Changwen, Shao Dazhen, Tang Kemei, Jin Shangyi, and Ge Weimo.

7. Members of the Organizational Committee are: Gan Yang, Zhang Yaojun, Liu Dong, Liu Xiaochun, Zhang Zuying, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Tang Qingfeng, Yang Lihua, Zhou Yan, Fan Di'an, Wang Mingxian, Kong Changan, and Fei Dawei.

8. The Head of the Organizational Committee is: Gao Minglu.

9. Academic activities and promotions in various forms will be held in the course of the show. Awards will be granted to the entries.

Organizational Committee of China/Avant-Garde, October 1988.¹⁴

The Difficulties of Fundraising

It seemed to me that the problem of the budget was even more difficult than that of political censorship. The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was an unprecedented event in Chinese contemporary art history. It was distinct from the normal exhibitions held in the National Art Museum of China in terms of both its political sensibility and its financial sources. Although it was lucky to be accepted, due to the temporary easing of the political situation, this did not mean that any corresponding financial support would come from the National Art Museum and the government. All museums in China are governmentally controlled cultural enterprises, and until the late 1980s the majority of art exhibitions held in museums such as the National Art Museum of China had been financed either by the central government or by local governments and organizational units.

Before the late 1980s, the financial resources for most exhibitions held in the National Art Museum of

China (and other museums) could come from three sources. One source was an official organizing unit that had enough money to budget for the exhibition. Another option was a budget that was planned and supported by the central government, especially for important official exhibitions. For example, in 1984, the Ministry of Culture allocated 900,000 yuan (then about \$300,000) for the Sixth National Art Exhibition, which opened in the National Art Museum of China (and seven other sites in different cities) in September 1984. Thirdly, if the organizing units did not have sufficient funds provided by their local government, they would try to obtain money from other official units, such as government-controlled factories or companies that had achieved higher fiduciary success and had excess profits.¹⁵

Because of the transition from a planned national economy to a market-based one, the traditional system of official patronage has changed since the mid-1980s. For instance, under a national law, most of the profits earned by a governmental enterprise must be submitted to the government at the end of the year. Under the new marketing system, some national enterprises may use part of their profits to finance certain cultural enterprises, so that they can benefit from the cultural programs, such as through free advertising on television, in art galleries, on invitations, and in catalogues. More importantly, however, such financial support might effectively boost the mutual private relationship (*guanxi*) between the leadership of the enterprise and the exhibition organizers. Furthermore, most of the time an intermediary, perhaps the decision-maker on the patron's side, would take a percentage of the total financed amount (10–30 percent).

This phenomenon did not appear until the late 1980s. Although the central Chinese government tried hard to prohibit the corrupt phenomenon of *zanzhu* or "donations," it was unsuccessful due to the limitation of the governmental system itself. In the past two decades many rich private enterprises have appeared in China, and a few of them have become patrons supporting unofficial cultural programs, such as exhibitions, to demonstrate their pure enthusiasm for promoting new culture and art. One of the reasons for this system might be the different Chinese tax system: in the West the corporations and

private businesses who financially support a cultural program can get the benefits of a tax deduction, but in China there are no such benefits for Chinese private corporations. They decide to devote their own resources simply to support cultural enterprises.

Obviously, it was impossible for “China/Avant-Garde” to get financial support from the government, and the six sponsors were themselves struggling and could only provide moral support. Thus, raising money turned out to be a tough challenge for the organizers of the avant-garde exhibition, for whom it was a totally unprecedented experience.

After the exhibit site was confirmed, the organizational committee of the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition immediately wrote an open letter to the public seeking support. It was drafted by Fan Di’an, who was in charge of issuing documents and dealing with public affairs. I then shifted my concentration to fundraising, the most difficult work at the moment, after the other curatorial difficulties were overcome and the artworks were collected. I traveled to Shanghai and Nanjing in south China, Harbin in northeast China, Wuhan in central China, and Tianjin, my hometown in north China, to raise money.

At first, one of the largest national corporations, the Panda Electronic Industry Corporation in Nanjing (*Nanjing xionghao dianzi gongsi*), agreed to donate 200,000 yuan (at that point about \$40,000), with the stipulation that the exhibition must provide the corporation with advertisements in the space of the exhibition, in newspapers, and on television, as well as contribute a number of the artworks from the exhibition to the corporation. Unfortunately, two months after the start of negotiations, just as the president of the company was about to sign the contract, he changed his mind and withdrew the company’s support without any explanation. All of this transpired a mere two months before the exhibition was to open. At that moment, the committee had received only 2,500 yuan, which was less than 2 percent of the entire budgetary projection of at least 150,000 yuan (\$30,000). The fundraising requests of the organizational committee were refused by almost everyone, which was profoundly frustrating. On one hand, the political pressure and lack of financial resources endured by the avant-

garde exhibition were mainly due to the political sentiments against avant-garde art. On the other hand, since traditional and academic art has been the dominant art style in China since the 1980s, it was not surprising that the avant-garde was an incomprehensible art form for the public. Therefore, both the exhibition’s political risk and its lack of promised commercial benefits discouraged potential financial supporters.

Facing these enormous difficulties, I was forced to seek other means of raising funds. Together with a friend, Wang Mingxian, who was also a member of the committee, I described our troubles to some friends in the cultural world and to all avant-garde artists, asking for their assistance. Then Zhang Kangkang, one of the most famous novelists in China, who had been sent to Heilongjiang province as a reeducated student during the Cultural Revolution, published an article expressing her sympathies with the committee. She appealed to her readers, and especially to Feng Jikai, a popular novelist based in Tianjin, to support the avant-garde exhibition.¹⁶

At the time, Feng Jikai was the chairman of the Tianjin Writers and Artists Association, and he strongly supported modern experimental art; an immediate response garnered some funds for the exhibition from factories and the magazine *Free Discussion on Literature* (*Wenxue ziyoutan*) in Tianjin. I twice made round trips between Beijing and Tianjin on the same day in order to have enough materials to convince Feng. This moved him. With Feng’s help, I received 20,000 yuan and brought it back to Beijing. This money suddenly made the avant-garde exhibition viable, though it was far from an adequate amount.

Several artists also managed to convince their businessmen friends to donate. The effect was that various factories and companies contributed, in total, 40,000 yuan (about \$10,000). Among the artists, some took on labor in exchange for contributions, and some even donated their own works, or gave works from their collections of traditional paintings, to the contributors. Moreover, along with their entries to the exhibition, every artist who participated in the show voluntarily gave 100 yuan, about the amount of a month’s salary, to the committee. Thus 186 artists contributed 18,600 yuan (about \$4,000).

Budget for #Exhibition of Chinese Modern Art#

1. RENT	RMB45,000
2. TRANSPORTATION (WAY TO AND BACK WITHIN BEIJING AND SINGLE OUTSIDE BEIJING	6,000
3. WATER AND ELECTRICITY	4,000
4. LABOURERS' PAYMENT	15,000
5. MATERIALS	10,000
6. DESIGN AND REALIZATION	23,000
7. PROMOTION AND ADVERTISEMENT (INVITATION, CATALOGUE, POSTER, POST FEES, TV AND BROADCASTING ADVERTISEMENT, PRESS CON- FERENCE AND WORKING DINNER)	57,500
8. SYMPOSIUMS	500
9. AWARD DIPLOMA	3,000
10. COLLECTION	50,000
11. RENT FOR VEHICLES	3,000
12. OFFICE FEE	2,000
<hr/>	
TOTAL	RMB 219,050

Figure 4.10

The original copy of the expenditure budget of the
"China/Avant-Garde" exhibition (English version).

The most moving story of the fundraising was that of a private businessman called Song Wei, who ran the Great Wall Fast Food Company (*Beijing changcheng kuaican*) and contributed 27,000 yuan to the exhibition. His ambition was to build the first private art museum in China, to be named the Great Wall Art Museum (*Changcheng yishu bowuguan*). After the avant-garde exhibition closed, he collected about fifty major works from the exhibition directly from the artists. He thus turned out to be the first major private collector of Chinese avant-garde art, before it had gotten any attention in the international market. Unfortunately, he soon gave up this significant work, as various factors (such as financial difficulties during the June Fourth Tian'anmen incident, family situation, and physical problems) forced him to give up collecting entirely.¹⁷

Song Wei's retreat was both symbolic and realistic. It revealed both the lack of financial ability and diminished interest from private rich people in China. On the other hand, although the Chinese avant-garde art of the 1980s should be recognized as an international phenomenon, directly influenced by Western modernism and postmodernism through translations and foreign exhibitions, without foreign market and institutional connections it was domestic in economic terms. It was not until the end of the Cold War, in particular after the mid-1990s, that international collectors and the international art market came to China. Before that, attention came not from professional international art collectors and museums, but mainly from amateur, personally interested investors, for instance ambassadors in Beijing such as Uli Sigg, writers, or non-mainstream gallery owners.

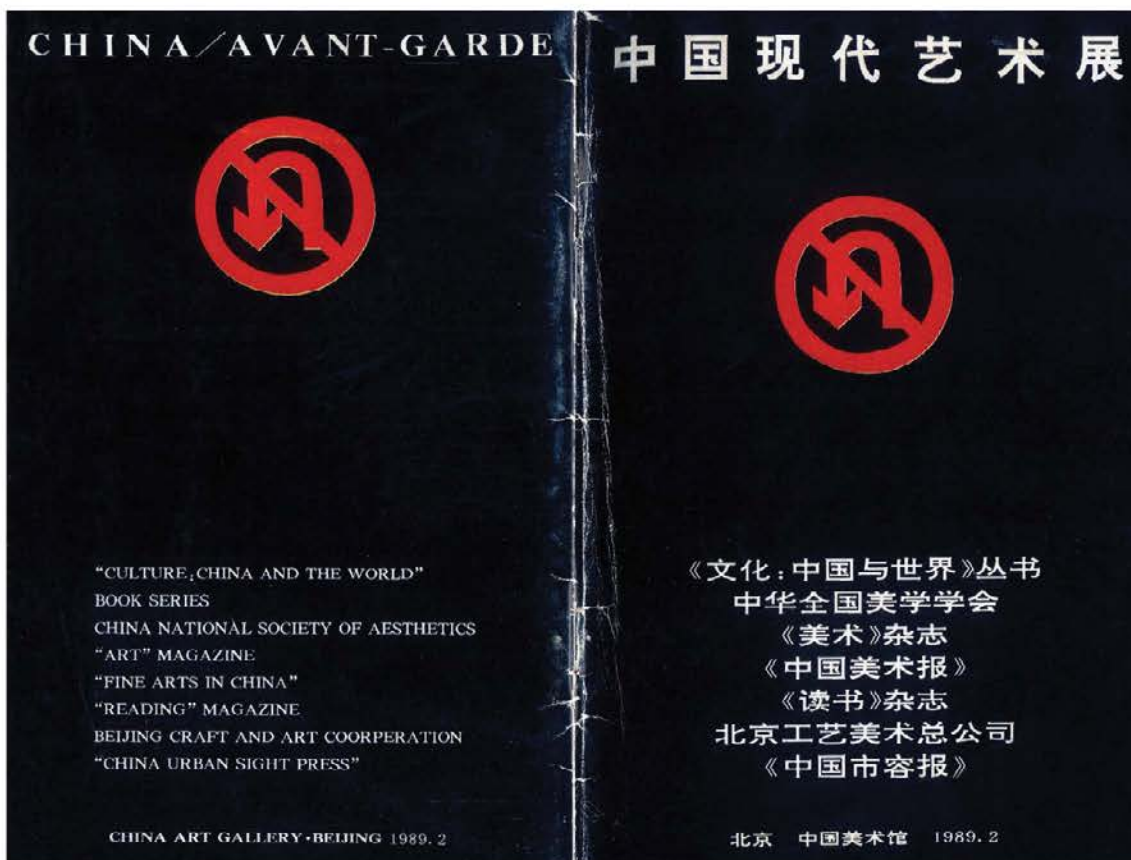
By the time "China/Avant-Garde" opened, only a few foreigners had bought Chinese avant-garde works. The Tokyo Modern Art Gallery collected six pieces during the exhibition, which initiated foreign interest in collecting this type of work.

Regrettably, by the time of the exhibition opening in February 1989, I had raised only 118,600 yuan (about \$23,000). The original goal was to raise at least 150,000 yuan (about \$30,000), and the sufficient amount would have been about 220,000 yuan (about \$44,000). That amount included the fee for the use of the gallery space (more than

50,000 yuan), shipping fees, fees for space design, advertising fees, conference fees, the catalogue fee, and so on. Although the amount we had collected was still not the total amount we had hoped for, the exhibition could be opened. I was forced to cut some of the original budget, and failed to have an ideal catalogue published for the exhibition. We were only able to produce a small publication, with my preface on the opening page followed by a catalogue, a total of 46 pages.¹⁸

Two Closures and a "Small Tian'anmen Square"

While working to overcome the political and economic difficulties associated with the show, the committee had shipped the 300 exhibition pieces from provinces all around the country to Beijing. Under the censorship laws, the committee was required to get official approval of all the works from the authorities. On February 4, 1989, the day before the opening of the exhibition, the officials of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party, the Ministry of Culture, the Chinese Artists Association, and the National Art Museum of China came to the exhibition galleries to examine and officially approve the avant-garde exhibition for the public opening. In order to get strong support, the committee also invited some influential older artists and art historians from the Central Academy of Fine Art to join in the inspection. A number of the works were criticized by the censorship group because of their political and sexual content. After a heated dispute between the censorship group, the members of the committee, and academic experts, most of these controversial works were kept in, but three pieces were pulled. Among the works denied by the committee, but finally kept in, the most controversial one was Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong No. 1*, which the censors accused of putting Mao into a jail. The work was allowed to remain after the artist wrote an inscription explaining what he intended to tell the audience. After the censorship meeting on February 4, 1989, Wang Guangyi and I discussed the inscription and decided to write a note beside the painting which said that Mao was one of the most influential political figures in Chinese modern history; we should evaluate his historical role using



PREFACE

It has seen a half-century long development of modern art (Avant-Garde) in China since the 20's and the 30's of the century. The process is also full of frustration. Any tendency or movement had not been able to take shape until the past few years, exactly speaking, until the year of 1985. We consider this exhibition a summary and a review of the active development of modern art as a movement in this country.

It is a matter of fact that modern art, originated in the West, has already become pervasive in every corner of the world. China, with an ancient cultural background, will build herself into an important base of modern art creation. The crystallization of human culture has certainly condensed the common experience of human beings, the evolution of civilization and, after all, an identical ideal to which all the people from various cultural areas in the contemporary world have been pursuing. The fact of constructing a building of modern civilization upon the solid foundation of traditional culture has demonstrated the courage and ambition of Chinese people facing and taking challenges of all kinds.

Modern ideas, as the spirit of modern art, is modern people's self-conscious experience of themselves existing state, the world and the cosmos space concerned with their life, and furthermore, their new interpretations of these subjects. This idea Logical revolution has caused a tendency in modern art extending outward to a wider cultural field. On one hand, it, by means of combining various materials and medium, touches and moves those personal experiences of social culture and of human history in human brains, and, through reworked by association, forms a certain cultural pattern. On the other, it intervenes the unconsciousness of human beings, discovers the origin of human life and contemplates the extreme substance of human being through making up compositions with abstract or represented images. As a result, a piece of art work is such a world—or an individual life, or a history of human life, or a process of social-cultural movement.

The exploring of space and thinking, while forging ahead and bringing about changes day after day, is leading modern art into a magnificent and somewhat grotesque realm. Is the world changing human eyes? Or, on the contrary, the eyes twisting the world? There is no need to get entangled in such a kind of endless debates of philosophy of art. We have already seen a natural presentation of all happened in our inner world, those we have seen, thought about, dreamt of, and even not been able to see... Innumerable wonderlands. This is the art world of modern human beings as well as their spiritual world! In this world, there existing a mixture of conflicts between the beautiful and the ugly, the new and the old, the true and the false, the good and the evil, and also existing complicated values. It has completed a process of spiritual sublimation and cultural immersing through the mutual conten-

plation and common creation among artists, their words and spectators after saying good-bye to the ideas of art meant to pleasing human sense organs alone or instructing people with dogmas. In this opinion, we can reach at such a conclusion that modern art is an art belonged to the people.

Modern art in China today, while the country is opening its door to the world, is no more so difficult to move forward as in the past but displaying a splendid sight. However, it is undeniable that it still needs a struggle for walking further more smoothly. The way towards perfection, for all those existing in the world, always begins from the first step, and reaches at another first step on an upper stage. Therefore, such a "first step" is exactly the purpose, direction and significance of our exhibition.

In the meantime of celebrating the Chinese new year, the traditional spring festival and the grand meeting of Chinese modern art world, let's raise up the glasses in our hands and drink success to this exhibition. We are confirmed that there will be a prosperous future for the need of Chinese modern art. At the end, I would like to remind that our exhibition is considered a memory of generation of artists who have contributed themselves to the creation of a modern art in China.

Gao Minglu

Figure 4.11

The small catalogue of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition and the preface by Gao Minglu.

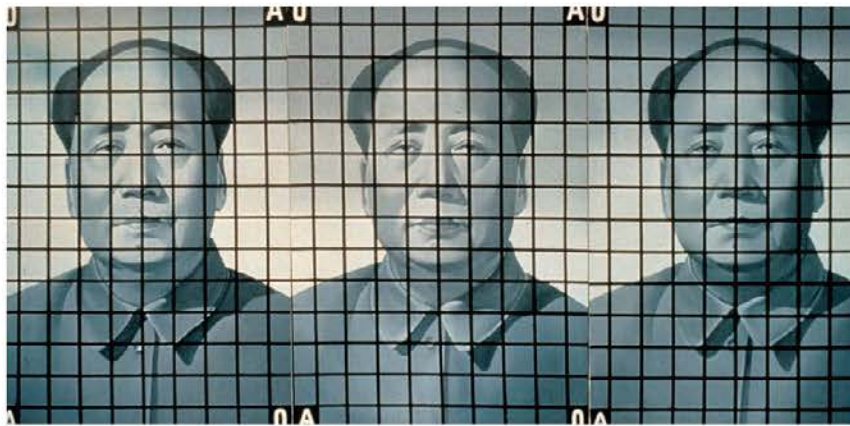


Figure 4.12
Wang Guangyi, *Mao Zedong No. 1*, 1988.

rational analysis and logical thinking, which were represented in the work by the grid drawn on the surface of Mao's official portrait.

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition opened on February 5, 1989. The works in the exhibition were distributed over six gallery spaces that occupied three floors, and included 297 pieces in various media including painting, sculpture, photographs, video, and installations. This day was a mammoth festival for every avant-garde artist. Five enormous black banners were extended on the ground in the square in front of the National Art Museum marked with

the exhibition title and logo, which was designed by Yang Zhilin and based on the public traffic sign indicating "No U-Turn." According to the original design, the five banners were to be hung from the roof of the exterior of the museum facing the square. This plan was rejected by the director of the National Art Museum, but the artists solved the problem by laying them out on the ground.

The exhibition's opening ceremony was shrouded by a nervous and solemn atmosphere, as if something was bound to happen. After I gave a speech celebrating this important historical event, the birth of the first

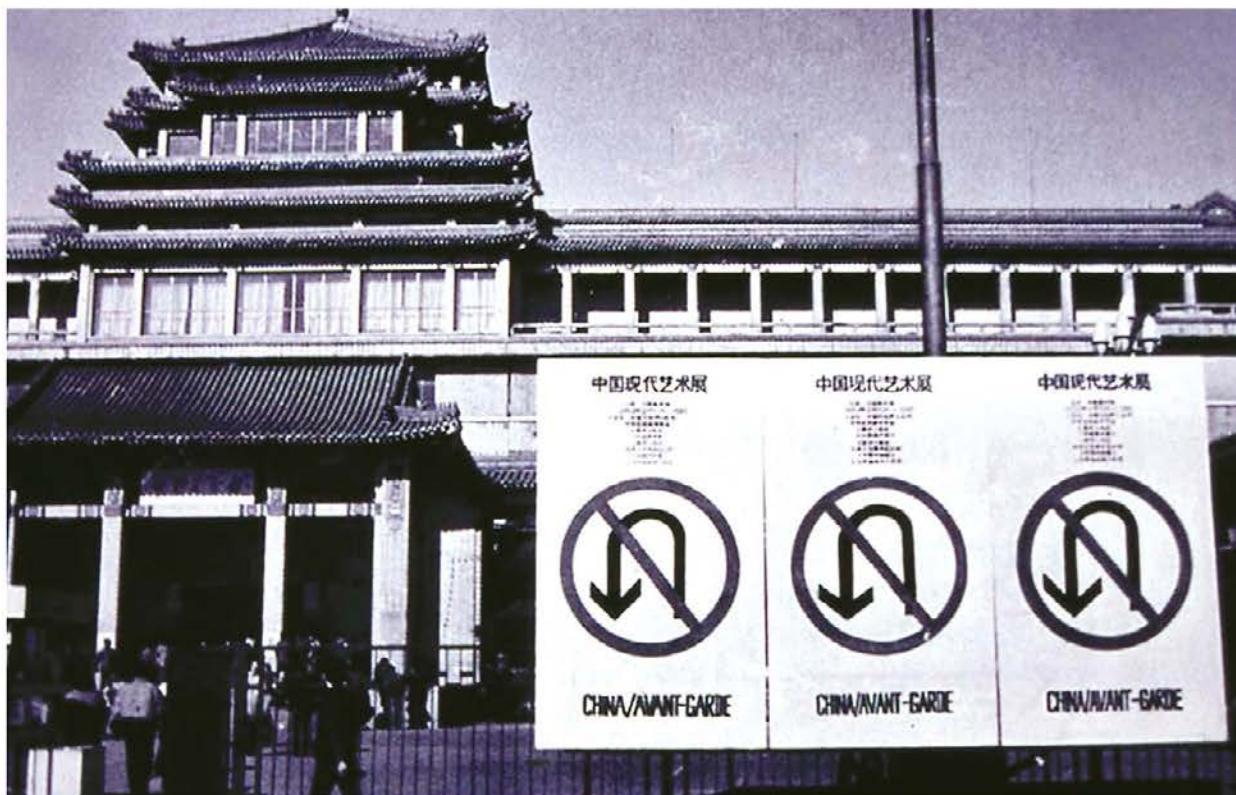


Figure 4.13
The National Art Museum of China, Beijing, with the poster of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition designed by Yang Zhilin.



Figure 4.14

The site of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, the square in the yard of National Art Museum of China, February 5, 1989. Photograph by A Zhen.



Figure 4.15

Gao Minglu giving the opening speech in the interior reception hall at the National Art Museum of China, February 5, 1989.

avant-garde exhibition in contemporary Chinese art history, the public entered the galleries. They were immediately met not only with the provocative installations and paintings, but also with several surprising performances, true happenings.

Wu Shanzhuan began his performance *Big Business* (*Dashengyi*) in the gallery of the first floor. Wu had brought 300 kilograms of fresh shrimp from a fishing village in Zoushan, Zhejiang province, where he worked as an art teacher for mass cultural education. He wrote the price of the shrimp on a blackboard and began selling them. The first buyer was Liu Kaiqu, the honorary director of the National Art Museum and one of the most influential sculptors in China. This work demonstrated Wu's idea that modern art in modern society is just a big business, which was a thesis he had presented in an avant-garde conference held in Huangshan city, Anhui province, in 1988. He explained his performance after the shutdown of the show by the authorities, saying, "The National Art Museum is not only a place to display artwork, but it also can be a black market [*heishi*]. For the Chinese New Year, I have brought first-quality shrimp suitable for export from my home village in celebration of the holiday and to enrich people's spiritual and material life in our capital. The unit price: 9.5 yuan. Place of display: National Art Museum. Urgent for buying."¹⁹

Another performance artist whose work was not otherwise represented in the show, named Zhang Nian, sat in the corner of the gallery on the second floor hatching eggs. In his manifesto, which hung across his chest, he wrote: "During the incubation period, I will not discuss theoretical questions with anyone, to avoid harming the younger generation." The artist Li Shan, one of the most important painters of the rationalist painting group, seated himself at his installation and began washing his feet in a basin decorated with many portraits of US President Reagan. This cynical behavior was undoubtedly a kind of blasphemy against the sacred art palace—the National Art Museum of former days. An hour after the opening, Wang Deren threw more than seven thousand condoms onto all the works on all three floors of the building, to demonstrate his hegemonic power over all the works displayed in the exhibition. In other words, he attempted to use condoms to unify all the works.²⁰



Figure 4.16

Wu Shanzhuan, *Big Business: Selling Shrimp*, 1989.

Three hours after the opening of the exhibition, Xiao Lu, a young woman artist from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, fired two gunshots, which shocked the National Art Museum. Xiao Lu suddenly pulled out a gun and fired two shots at her installation, *Dialogue*; or more precisely, at a mirror between two telephone booths in which stood full-length pictures of a male and a female student talking to each other on the phone. The president of the Beijing Public Security Bureau, who was on the spot, immediately seized Tang Song, a friend of Xiao, who was standing near the installation, and ordered me to close the exhibition. The reason given was that the scene of the gunshot had to be preserved intact in order to trace the cause of the incident. (Actually the Public Security Bureau had long been suspicious of the organizational work of the exhibition. There were at least ten plainclothes public security persons in the galleries.) Immediately after the shooting, several police cars fully loaded with armed personnel arrived in the square in front of the National Art Museum. The police rudely ordered that the gallery be shut down for three days. Public news from both inside and outside of China reported on this event.

In China there is a law that prohibits citizens and resident foreigners from owning guns; the only exceptions are for soldiers and police personnel, who have permits. The Beijing Public Security Bureau stated that both Xiao Lu and Tang Song had violated this law and had to be detained. At four o'clock in the afternoon, encouraged by her uncle, Xiao Lu surrendered herself to the authorities. After being detained for two and a half days, both people were released because there was no evidence that the two artists had plotted a murder. However, because of the



Figure 4.17
Zhang Nian, *Hatching Eggs*, 1989.



Figure 4.18
Li Shan, *Goodbye*, 1989.



Figure 4.19
Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 1989.



Figure 4.20
Police cars entering the square of the National Art Museum of China after the gunshot at the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, February 5, 1989. Photograph by A Zhen.



Figure 4.21
The *New York Times* article
reporting on the closure.

shooting and other events, the exhibition was forced to close for three days. The government authorities still believed that this incident held political meaning, and most of the foreign news media reported it as a political event. According to the claims of the two artists, their shooting was nothing more than a celebration of finishing the installation work, no matter what the public thought about it. After the two artists were released; they gave me a declaration in person, asking me to make a public announcement on their behalf. The declaration is as follows:

As parties to the shooting incident on the day of the opening of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, we consider it a purely artistic incident. We consider that in art, there may be artists with different understandings of society, but as artists we are not interested in politics. We are interested in the values of art as such, and in its social value, and in using the right form with which to create, in order to carry out the process of deepening that understanding.

Xiao Lu, Tang Song²¹

Although Xiao Lu was named as the author of the installation, and she was also the person who opened fire, the media and art circles widely took both Xiao Lu and Tang Song to be the initiators and performers of the two gunshots because Tang was the first one arrested. There was even a rumor that Tang came from a military family background and had lent the gun to Xiao, until Xiao declared that the gun she used was in fact borrowed from Li Songsong, a teenage friend of hers, who did have a military family background. No one doubted the coauthorship of the two gunshots until, fifteen years later, Xiao Lu openly declared that she was the only author of the gunshot as well as of the installation. The gunshots were part of the installation as a whole. Xiao was silent about her work and never mentioned the question of authorship until the end of her fifteen-year relationship with Tang Song in 2004.

The declaration of her solo authorship of the *Dialogue* and the gunshots began with five letters Xiao wrote me in the period between February 4,



Figure 4.22

Xiao Lu, *Fifteen Shots—From 1989 to 2003*, 2003.

2004, and March 23, 2004. After I received the letters I responded to her in a letter encouraging her to claim her authorship, because, first, it was her right to declare the truth, and second, it was very important, not only for the generation of the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition but also for the younger generation, to rediscover the complex context of this historical event made by a particular female individual.²² The ambiguity that disturbed Xiao Lu’s emotions eventually broke out fifteen years after her two gunshots in the National Art Museum of China. In another performance work, she made fifteen gunshots on photos with her own image as a metaphor for her hidden anger at herself. Although the fifteen shots were made in 2003, the title of the work is *Fifteen Shots—From 1989 to 2003*. The shots in 2003 were a bitter memory as well as a farewell to the past.

The two shots of 1989 were aimed at a mirror; those of 2003 at the photos. Fifteen years ago, the sound shocked the gallery, Beijing, even the world; this time only herself, because she made the shots at a firearms instructional club, the only place where Chinese are allowed to open fire.

Why did Xiao Lu sit in silence for fifteen years? There definitely was a personal emotional reason at the beginning, as she and Tang Song immediately fell in love when both were arrested. There was also a reason that was a crucial cause of the performance itself. Xiao Lu’s gunshots were not, as people commonly said, merely a violent gesture against authority; this is too simple and superficial an interpretation. In her recent biography, she explains that as a teenage girl she had been raped by an older socialist realist artist, who was also her godfather.²³ The anger this caused might well bring her to a totally rebellious orientation including an embrace of avant-garde art, and thus a departure from the

path of her parents, who were also Soviet-trained socialist realist painters. One may then understand the gunshots by Xiao Lu as a paradoxical, ambiguous act. On one hand, this was a demonstration against her revolutionary bloodline, congruent with the youthful zeitgeist that was running in public and political networks at the particular moment before the June Fourth Movement. On the other hand, it was also a violent declaration of self-protection, in opposition to the common conception of females as powerless. Anger was everything at the moment for her, because she could not tell the public the nature of her distress. The only way of venting was to open fire on the artwork *Dialogue*, which she had made for her graduation.²⁴

This dislocated, or ambiguous, relationship between private and public, avant-garde and revolutionary, in the sense of Xiao Lu’s personal background and experience, as well as of female discourse and the national (and the avant-garde) ideological discourse, made her *Dialogue* with the two gunshots the most sophisticated and controversial work in the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, as well as in Chinese contemporary art history.²⁵

In another controversy, the East German Embassy accused the exhibition of violating that country’s sovereignty, because of Song Haidong’s small installation work in which the artist put a “wall” on edge between East and West Germany on a globe. I was informed by an official of the Chinese Artists Association that the embassy had asked that the piece be removed from the exhibition. The artist then removed the work, which was immediately collected by the Tokyo Modern Art Gallery. Ironically, the removal might be seen as a foreshadowing of the coming down of the Berlin Wall, which occurred not long thereafter.

All of this performance art reflected, from different angles, the artists' opinions about art and society. Their work provoked a great deal of controversy, which was intentionally manipulated by their secretly planned happenings. None of the performances had been announced to the National Art Museum, and some not even to the curator and organizational committee, before the opening of the exhibition.²⁶

After the exhibition had been closed four days, it opened again on February 10, 1989. However, the Public Security Bureau forced me to hire twenty security personnel to enforce the prohibition on performance art. I had to accept this and pay their salaries to the Public Security Bureau in order to keep the exhibition open.

The run of the avant-garde exhibition was not as peaceful as the National Art Museum of China and the Public Security Bureau had expected. On February 12, after the reopening of the exhibition, the museum, the Public Security Bureau, and the Beijing city government separately received three anonymous letters with the same content, which was made up of clipped and pasted newspaper characters. It said, "You must close the 'China/Avant-Garde' exhibition immediately, otherwise we will set off bombs in three places in the National Art Museum of China."²⁷

The Beijing Public Security Bureau and the National Art Museum nervously discussed ways to deal with the threat. They informed me of the situation, showing me the letters and forcing me to make an immediate determination about whether the exhibition should close or remain open. Meanwhile, the Public Security Bureau pointed out that if I agreed to keep the exhibition open, I would have to answer for any explosion. I refused to take responsibility for the bombs, and also refused to close the show; I maintained that the Beijing Public Security Bureau, not the committee, had the true duty to avert any explosion.

At night, however, the Beijing Public Security Bureau and the National Art Museum received a command from the president of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party and the president of the Ministry of Culture: the exhibition must close for two days while the Beijing Public Security Bureau searched for bombs in the gallery.

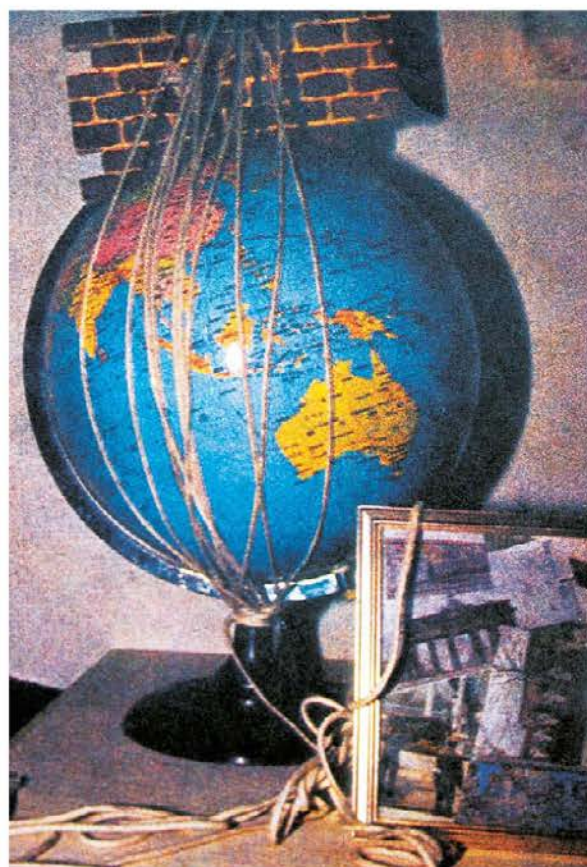


Figure 4.23

Song Haidong, *The Earth from the Aliens' Point of View*, 1989.

The public and artists were excited by the second shutdown and celebrated by any means, because the shutdowns might have been seen as a symbol of the avant-garde's provocative and aggressive ideology. Someone even made a public commemorative envelope for the second closure, helping people remember the dates (which appear on the bottom left).

The Beijing Public Security Bureau used armed police and various other means, from modern technical equipment to search dogs, to search for the bombs in all corners of the National Art Museum of China over the two days of the closure. Predictably, however, there were no bombs in the gallery. Was it a joke? Of course, it was possible that the letter was a real threat, but it was also possible that it was another performance, like Xiao's two gunshots. It was not known who sent the letters until 1995, when the Zhejiang Public Security Bureau detained an artist named Liu Anping, from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, for creating the anonymous letter as a performance.

After the exhibition opened again on February 17, the atmosphere was even tenser and much more sensitive than before. The viewers were required to leave their bags at a place indicated in the square in front of the gallery before they were allowed to enter. There were more guards watching for bombers. The art exhibition seemed to become a dangerous battlefield in which any unpredictable incident might occur at any time.

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition closed on February 19. It had only remained open, in total, for eight days and two hours. The original plan was for the show to last fifteen days.

The National Art Museum of China and the official authorities accused the sponsors, rather than the artists, of having violated the stipulations that the Chinese Artists Association had imposed on the exhibition. Hence, the National Art Museum of China made a decision that each of the seven sponsors of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition should be fined 2,000 yuan, and none would be allowed to hold any shows in the National Art Museum of China for the next two years. The complete notice from the National Art Museum of China is as follows:



Figure 4.24

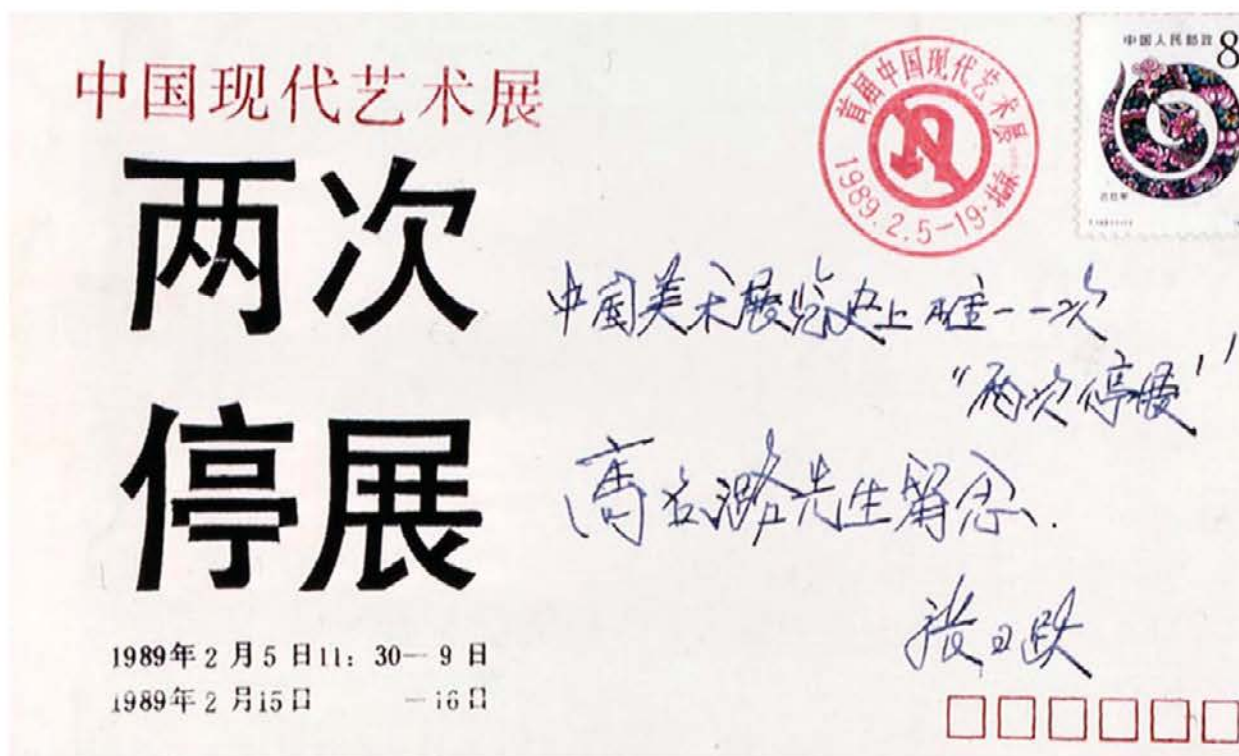
The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was closed down for two days.

Figure 4.25

Closing Down Twice, commemorative envelope made by Zhang Riya, a postal designer. On the bottom left are marked the dates of the two closing periods.

Notification of Fines Imposed on the Sponsors of the "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition for Agreement Violation and Shooting-Induced Suspension of Show

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, which opened on the morning of February 5 at our gallery, has violated the exhibition agreement and the rules of the National Art Museum of China. On more than one occasion, black cloths bearing the show signs were spread on the square in front of the venue, and award plaques bearing the words *Jintian xiaowu tingshui* [No water this afternoon] and framed with red silk were hung on public toilets. At one point, three persons covered with white cloths came out of the exhibition hall. On the east hall of the first floor, some persons were selling fish and shrimp; or washing their feet and throwing condoms or coins. On the second floor was somebody who was hatching eggs.



The officials of our gallery informed the director of the organizational committee and the representative of the sponsoring units and demanded that these violations of the exhibition agreement be remedied, but to no avail. As a result, the plaques had to be taken down from the toilets by the officials of our gallery. Then around 11 a.m., a shooting occurred on the east hall of the first floor which resulted in the closing down of the exhibition and suspension of ticket sales by the Public Security Bureau.

The sponsoring units of "China/Avant-Garde" should be held primarily responsible for the above-mentioned incidents. The occurrences were not only a violation of the exhibition agreement, but also disturbed the normal work of other shows and caused great damage to the reputation of the National Art Museum of China. Because of this, we have decided to fine the violators—the organizational committee—2,000

yuan and ban the seven sponsoring units of "China/Avant-Garde" from holding any exhibitions at the National Art Museum of China in the next two years.

A copy of this notification will be sent to the following sponsoring units of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition:

Meishu, Culture: China and the World Series, All-China Aesthetic Association, *Zhongguo meishubao*, *Reading Magazine*, Beijing Arts and Crafts Corporation, and China City Environment.

Cc: Art Bureau of the Ministry of Culture

Chinese Artists Association

The National Art Museum of China

February 13, 1989

Perhaps there was an understandable ambivalence among the government officials. Because the avant-garde exhibition was the first large-scale and completely Westernized exhibition held in China after the opening to the West, the Chinese government probably wanted to use the show as a symbol of its cultural policy of increasing openness. This allowed the avant-garde artists to use this opportunity to achieve their own goals. Ann Scott Tyson, a staff writer of the *Christian Science Monitor* who was at the opening of “China/Avant-Garde,” wrote: “The outrageous stunt revealed how China’s avant-garde artists are brashly taking advantage of the opportunity provided by eased state censorship in a bid to spark greater public attention for their highly unorthodox art.”²⁸

Two months after the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, the Beijing student demonstrations broke out. Following the government’s crackdown on the democratic movement on June 4, 1989, the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition was repeatedly attacked as an important manifestation of the evils of bourgeois liberalism. Moreover, the exhibition was later referred to in print by some hard-liners as a small Tian’anmen Square of the art world, partly because Xiao Lu’s gunshots can be seen symbolically as the first gunfire of the June Fourth students’ insurrection (*baoluan*).²⁹

As the organizer of the exhibition, I inevitably also got punished by the government. After the June 4 incidents, I was informed by the authorities that I needed to study Marxism at home, and I was prohibited from editing, publishing, lecturing, and traveling outside Beijing. A year later, I got an invitation letter from the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and Ohio State University. After about six months of waiting for approval from the authorities, I finally received a passport issued by the authorities and was able to go to the United States as a visiting scholar in October 1991.³⁰

One may ask why the 1989 exhibition used “China/Avant-Garde” as its English title while the original Chinese title, “Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan,” literally means “Chinese Modern Art Exhibition.” In Western art history, “avant-garde” and “modernism” went side by side, they were almost the same thing, although in the postmodern period there was a

contrasting “neo-avant-garde.” But in the Chinese context of the late 1980s, *qianwei* (avant-garde) seemed more radical and broader than *xiandai* (modern art). Therefore, when I discussed the English title of the exhibition with some critics, such as Zhou Yan, the editor of the exhibition catalogue, and Hou Hanru, the catalogue’s translator, we all agreed that “avant-garde” made more sense than “modern” as a translation of the original Chinese title. We also had a feeling that although “modern” in the Chinese context means “new,” in the West it might be a term out of fashion, even suggesting a period style. The term “avant-garde,” however, is more contemporary, ongoing, and not confined to a style. It particularly fit the art of the ’85 Movement in the second half of the 1980s.

In fact, it was not until the lead-up to the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition that Chinese artists and critics of the ’85 Movement began widely and formally to use the term “avant-garde” to define the new art. The most commonly used term in the 1970s and earlier 1980s had been “modern” (*xiandai*), but sometime around 1986 or 1987 some critics, artists, and writers began to use the term “avant-garde” (*qianwei*, usually in visual art, or *xianfeng*, commonly in literature) to name the new art and new literature. Some *guannian* art groups, such as Xiamen Dada in Fujian, the M Group in Shanghai, and the Southern Artists Salon in Guangzhou, claimed that they were pursuing a “surpassing avant-garde” (*chao qianwei*). Therefore, they declared that their ideas tended toward “postmodernism” or the “contemporary” (see chapter 6).

Generally speaking, then, before the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, “modern,” “avant-garde,” “postmodern,” and “contemporary” had all been used by the artists of the ’85 Movement. After the 1989 exhibition, however, “modern art” (*xiandai yishu*) was no longer used to define any new art phenomenon in the Chinese art world, and “avant-garde” became the term most frequently used, especially in the first half of the 1990s, both domestically and internationally. Since the later 1990s, “contemporary art” (*dangdai yishu*) has become the most popular term.

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Metaphysical Modernity

Rationalist Painting and Current of Life Painting

The art groups described in this chapter are grouped together by the belief that artwork should evoke “the spirit of humanism” (*renwen jingshen*) or “humanism and rationalism” (*renwen lixing*). Although, since the Renaissance, humanism in the West has been differentiated from the modern idea of individualism, in China after the Cultural Revolution the term “humanism” (*rendaozhuyi*) indicated the search for individual freedom in conjunction with a fraternity searching for what is most noble in the human condition. Additionally, Chinese humanist ideas strongly opposed the division of people into different classes. As discussed in chapter 2, the scar (*shanghen*) and rustic painters presented this humanism in their art either by showing the emotional wounds inflicted on the Chinese populace or by depicting the poor, innocent peasants and pastoralists in the countryside. Simultaneously in literature, a “searching for roots” (*xungen*) movement arose containing two conflicting camps, those of “native soil writing” and “urban literature.” As rustic realist painting and the scar group addressed scenes from the Cultural Revolution, the tendency to examine the customs and mores of local regions, known as *xungen* fiction, first appeared. It was a modest reaction against the increasingly formulaic scar literature (*shanghen wenxue*) of the late 1970s and early '80s. Scar literature openly deplored the national chaos and individual suffering of the Cultural Revolution.

However, the generation of the '85 Movement immediately launched another campaign of humanism (*renwen jingshen*). It was a significant departure from the earlier one launched by the post-Cultural Revolution generation, because the 1980s generation, in general, was pursuing an idealistic future characterized by cultural modernity, no longer

looking backward to traditional or native roots to explore certain historical values of humanity. For them, humanity itself represented the nexus of the issue of modernity, transcending the struggles of the painful past and personal experience. In this sense, the '85 Movement departed from the “realistic” restrictions of the post-Cultural Revolution generation, who mostly targeted the Cultural Revolution period.

Further, they returned to the May Fourth heritage of seeking cultural enlightenment and total modernity. As described in my 1986 speech delineating the '85 Movement's characteristics: “In the art world, a movement emerged that embraced all the issues of the May Fourth Movement and revived the core spirit of the cultural movements begun in the early twentieth century. It is part of the cultural debates and is the cultural fever of the year.”¹

Transitional Avant-Gardes Look toward the Ideal Future

In the mid-1980s, after China suddenly opened to the rest of the world, many intellectuals and a new generation of artists who had received academic training thrived with a strong dose of Western modern and contemporary influence. The humanism embraced by the artists of the '85 Movement reflected a desire to transcend both Mao's ideology of “proletarian people” and the complaints of the “wounded people” espoused by the Red Guard generation, especially the artists of the Stars group and of scar painting. On the contrary, the artists of the '85 Movement identified themselves as “universalists,” which in this specific moment revealed the core of Chinese modernity, a modernity ready to embrace all advances from different ages and civilizations and to go beyond the reality of existing