5

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

civilizations. "Humanism," in this context, was an idealistic hope of producing a spiritual order in which a new future would be built; it also implicated an ambiguous modern Chinese nationalism in its strident search for a specifically Chinese modernity. At the same time, this humanism continued the post-Cultural Revolution period's tendency to desire more personal freedom after several decades of selfless devotion to Mao's revolution, during which humanism was criticized as bourgeois.[2]

The humanism of the '85 Movement is a rationalist rather than empirical notion. It is this rationalism that distinguishes the '85 Movement's "humanism" (*renwen*) from the previous postrevolutionary "humanism" (*rendao*). Of the two, *renwen* is broader and goes beyond political and Marxist narratives. If *renwen* mostly refers to the idealism, liberty, and freedom of an individual intellectual, the rationalist quality indicates a desire to awake from a black ideological midnight. I first used the notion of "rationalism" (*lixingzhuyi*) and "rationalist painting" to summarize and analyze the new art's philosophical tendencies following the post-Cultural Revolution generation. In "The Recent Developing Trends of Oil Painting" ("Jinnian youhua fazhan de liupai"), I used *lixingzhuyi* or "rationalism" to define the social skepticism and criticality of the Stars group, saying that rationalism was equivalent to moral functionalism (*daode gongneng zhuyi*) in art, as revealed in the Stars' manifesto. However, I also indicated that the Stars' art language, in itself, was insufficient to bear the entire burden of a much-needed moral philosophical function.[3]

In another essay titled "About Rationalist Painting" ("Guanyu lixing huihua"), I first defined rationalism by delineating three tendencies: (1) a spirit that transcends concrete phenomenological reality while pursuing a permanent, ideal order in the form of truth seeking; (2) a cultural reflection and critique; (3) a desire for freedom and self-determination. These three perspectives cover the different approaches of rationalist painting exemplifying the most powerful and fulfilled "humanism" in the '85 Movement.[4]

Rationalist painting, which included many groups of artists living in cities on the east coast of China, used cool, solemn, and sometimes grim forms to convey a philosophical and semireligious feeling. The major artists of the rationalist painting group included the Northern Art Group (*Beifang qunti*) in Harbin, Heilongjiang province; the Pool Society (*Chishe*) in Hangzhou; the Red Journey (*Hongselü*) in Nanjing; and some artists in Shanghai.

The broader phenomenon called current of life painting (*shengming zhiliu*) consisted of many groups of artists in western China, including the Southwest Art Group (*Xinan yishu qunti*) led by Mao Xuhui, Zhang Xiaogang, and Pan Dehai, as well as the Three Step Studio in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, led by Song Yongping and others. This trend addressed the significance of humanism in the breakdown of a collective rationalization that had suppressed individual consciousness and desires. Interested in foreign philosophy, psychology, and literature, these painters' approach and philosophy were very much like the "current of life" expressed as *élan vital* by Henri Bergson. Therefore, we use this notion to describe the natural disposition of life that embraces violence, irrationality, and intuitive action presented in the art of this period.

Although rationalist painting was more rational and current of life painting more expressive and emotional, they shared a common interest in determining the intrinsic substance of human nature, on a level that transcended individual experience. Their surrealist-inspired images had nothing to do with disenchantment with reality; quite the opposite, as their humanist impulses come from their pursuit of real truth (the true aim of Western surrealist philosophy, as it developed immediately following World War I).

When Mao's utopia crumbled, the people's majestic dreams and idolatrous enthusiasm were also destroyed. Immediately, however, another kind of utopia was promoted by a new generation of artists born in the 1960s who matured in the middle 1980s. Even in its anti-utopian stance, that is to say, this artistic avant-garde aimed to replace Mao's utopia with another utopian project of cultural modernity. This modernity would be determined in an idealistic way when the art project of the '85 Movement committed to close involvement in social and cultural practice. The vision of the total modernity project, however, was oriented toward a perfect future, rather than toward a radical reform

of the contemporary social environment. It is this motivation that made the art praxis of China in the 1980s a transcendent avant-garde. Moreover, there was a further entanglement with the narratives of modernity from the May Fourth Movement, characterized by a passionate quest for a society of committed intellectuals evolving out of principles born in the Confucian period.

Though they considered themselves a transitional generation, most artists of the '85 Movement believed they bore the responsibility for the nation's future and were enthusiastically willing to make sacrifices to bring about social reform.[5] Among all of the artists who participated in this driving project of Chinese modernity, rationalist painting groups were the most influential.

The social and cultural changes of the 1980s led the artists of the '85 Movement to express "humanistic enthusiasm" in their art, and to promote themselves as thinkers. Even though they were influenced by surrealism, we cannot define their paintings as "surrealist" in the sense commonly used by many critics, because the specific historical circumstances were quite different. The Western surrealists employed a dialectical juxtaposition of real and unreal to reveal the hypothetical utopian state of subjective freedom even while they existed in a state of objective *un*freedom. Accordingly, surrealism, like modernism in general, was reduced by Adorno and others to an artistic strategy of protest against capitalist society characterized by a failed methodology of resistance.[6] The unreal or dream scenes in the works of surrealism convey an irrational critique of the idealistic, progressive capitalist social modernity that had caused unprecedented human disasters, including the world war. This reversal between real and unreal, ideal and nonideal, cannot be found in the rationalist painting of China, for the latter conveys an integrative pursuit of the ideal in a harmonious but "transrealistic" scene. The comparison with Western surrealism ultimately fails to explicate the important phenomena of the Chinese avant-garde.[7]

Rationalist painting sought to unify painting praxis and reality, but with a metaphorical, not surrealist, approach to the pursuit of subjective freedom. The project of the Chinese avant-garde, at this moment, was neither dialectic nor a negation; rather it was a representation of a realm transcending (not resisting) reality, a mental realm of meditation and philosophical enlightenment that involved both the surrealist and the social realist style. However, because of their rationalist and philosophical characteristics, I coined the term rationalist painting (*lixing huihua*) to define these works.

Among the representatives of the rationalists, the Northern Art Group was the most prominent, including the major artists Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, Ren Jian, and Liu Yian. Promoting a "civilization of the north," they made the rather extreme claim that the culture of the temperate zone was dying and had to be replaced by a new culture from the northern climates. They subscribed to a long-held belief that a masculine strength inherent in northern Chinese culture was opposed to the comparative weakness of both Chinese traditional culture (which they associated with southern China), namely the literati culture that began in the fourteenth century, and modern Western civilization.

Apparently, their theory concerning the "civilization of the north" reflected a desire to strengthen nationalism and simultaneously create a new modern society at the important moment when China opened to the world. Deriving their style from images of surrealism, the artists sought an imagery that would express the strength and the silent, pure atmosphere of the frigid zone.[8] This pursuit of a quasi-religious purification reflects the artists' dream of founding a rational social order for China's future. However, importantly, they would build this future on the ruined foundation of contemporary culture. The image of Christianity became a metaphor for a new order of civilization more progressive than any previous. For instance, in his *Absolute Principle* of 1985, Shu Qun subordinated Christian iconography within a rationalistic grid, representing an order the artist considered capable of creating a sublime realm with which to purify reality.

In the beginning, the artists of the group demonstrated that their art creation was based not a study of art but rather of culture. As they proclaimed in their manifesto:

Figure 5.1

Shu Qun, *Absolute Principle*, 1985.

First of all, we would like to declare to the public that the "result" displayed in front of you is not the fruit of "creation." Like other behaviors of mankind, it is only one of many behaviors, except that the aim of this one is to establish a world with a new worldview. In this "world," all the old traditions of mankind will be gone and a new, strong, eternal and immortal "world" will be born instead.

We set forth the following requirements for our own paintings: our paintings are not art! Instead, they are only a means to express our way of thinking, constituting a part of our total thinking. We are firmly opposed to the so-called pure painting language and the cliché of making full of use of the property of painting materials in terms of the "autonomic" principle of painting. It is because we believe that to judge whether a collection of art has value or not depends primarily on whether it demonstrates genuine reason or the force of wisdom of mankind, and exhibits the noble qualities and sublime aspirations of human beings.

It is our opinion that Eastern and Western cultures have disintegrated and been replaced by a newborn culture—the civilization of the north. (This does not mean that the local cultures of northern Europe or northern Asia will dominate world civilization, but it is a symbolic concept based on the fact that in the whole cultural history of the East, Eastern cultures are constantly moving toward the north.) The culture of mankind, from its inception, has possessed a deep-rooted tendency to move gradually toward the frigid zone. This north-moving tendency shows that the inner force within mankind flows externally toward a direction full of conflicts. This manifests the inner spirit of human beings.[9]

Because of their dedication to cultural study, the artists of the Northern Art Group wrote a number of interdisciplinary essays on art, culture, and philosophy in the years 1985 and 1986.[10] These proclaim that the artist should act as a cultural soldier fighting for the future of a healthy society. On September 9, 1985, the Northern Art Group held a conference entitled "The Penetration and Outlook of Northern Art," which was supported by the Artists Association of Heilongjiang province. The group attempted to found a theoretical magazine, though it failed due to many difficulties. The theory and concepts of the Northern Art Group immediately spread to nationwide avant-garde circles, however. After they were noted by some important young editors, the activities of the Northern Art Group were extensively reported in journals and newspapers, receiving both affirmation and criticism. The approach of the Northern Art Group was the most philosophical among the rationalist painting groups, and it drew a lot of attention from critics and philosophers. In 1987, when the group held a conference in Changchun, the former Manchurian capital, to discuss rationalist painting, a number of critics and philosophers, including myself, participated.

Within the '85 Movement, conceptual art groups such as Xiamen Dada and artists of the current of life groups strongly criticized the Northern Art Group as being typical of rationalist painting, with a conceptual orientation of rationalization and constructive principles which, others believed, might easily lead to a suppression of individual feeling and desire.[11] For these other groups, the most important goal was to destroy any cultural doctrine, rather than construct a new civilization.

Another similar rationalist painting group was the Red Journey group located in Nanjing, Jiangsu province. The leading artists were Ding Fang, Yang Zhilin, and Xu Lei. Ding Fang was another of the most influential artists of the rationalist painting of the 1980s. Ding was born in Wugong, Shaanxi province, in northwest China, in 1956, moving south to Nanjing when he was a teenager. From 1978 to 1986 he studied as an undergraduate and then graduate student at the Nanjing Academy of Arts. After he graduated in 1983, he taught at the same school until he moved to Beijing to pursue a career as an independent artist in 1986.

Figure 5.2
The rationalist painting conference, Changchun, February 1987.

Along with Yang Zhilin and Xu Lei, Ding Fang was one of the major organizers of, and a participant in, the 1985 "Jiangsu Art Week Modern Art Festival" ("Jiangsu qingnian yishu zhou: Daxing yishuzhan"), the first influential exhibition covering all the experimental arts there. In 1986, after Ding returned from seeing the Zhuhai slide exhibition of the '85 Movement, he and another seven artists, including Yang Zhilin, a teacher at Nanjing Normal University (who would design the logo of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition of 1989), Xu Lei, Shen Qin, Zhai Xiaogang, Guan Ce, Cao Xiaodong, and Xu Yihui, decided to organize a new group named the Red Journey. (Red symbolizes life, so that Red Journey is the journey or process of life.) Principles published later in the brigade's manifesto show that their central concern was how to find and express their tragic feelings as they pursued a sublime and mystical artistic expression. They wrote, "We will build a common substance through our honest sacrifice. We are looking for a new life created from the depth of our hearts. We will touch the sublime when we sail toward the Faramita [*bian*, heaven]. We will be called by a holy command when our spirit meets the eternity."[12]

Figure 5.3

Red Journey, outdoor gathering and exhibition, City Wall, Zhongshan Gate, 1986.

The other *renwen jingshen* direction, the current of life, tended to address questions about the nature of life in order to explore humanitarian values. The primary difference between their artistic goals and those of the rationalists was that the current of life painters expressed their opinions about the nature of life by venting their own individual emotions or expressing their own life situations. While the rationalist painters looked forward to a purified utopian world in the future, current of life painters looked the other way, backward and inward, through images of distorted bodies or of people living a simple life.

Different artistic groups within this trend had different ideas about both the nature of life and the nature of art. Some groups emphasized that life is instinctual, while some emphasized the idea that life is a process of accommodation. Usually, their process of artistic expression started as a venting of individual emotions, but it then evolved to express social meaning as well. After expressing their individual feelings, these artists sometimes found that their problems stemmed from society. They were mainly influenced by existentialism, expressionism, and the writings of Freud. Their individualism contained the elements of a strong collective imbued with social concerns.

The Southwest Art Group was perhaps the most influential and typical group in the current of life trend, both in its idea and practice, just as the Northern Art Group was within the rationalist trend. Although the name of the group was geographical, this by no means implied that all its artists were from southwest China. They were, in fact, from various provinces, including Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, which are all in southwest China, as well as Shandong and Jiangsu provinces and the city of Shanghai on the east coast. Using "Southwest" in the name indicated two things. First, the major artists, such as Mao Xuhui, Zhang Xiaogang, Pan Dehai, and Ye Yongqing, were from the southwest, where they initiated the first exhibition of the group. Second, the geographical association indicated various cultural and aesthetic traits, such as simplicity, "primitivism," and a naive style. Like the artists of the Northern Art Group, those of the Southwest Art Group held many meetings and wrote a number of articles in addition to creating their artworks.[13]

In summary, the current of life artists, especially those in the Southwest Art Group, had two major concerns. They shared a basic philosophy with rationalist painting, but also significantly distinguished themselves from rationalist painting.

According to the current of life painting philosophy, art was not an act of materialization. Instead, it was a channel for the soul of mankind. Therefore, there were no such things as art criteria or standard art forms, as all of this came from the current feelings of human beings. For instance, Zhang Xaiogang believed that art was equal to love and was made of all kinds of dreams, whereas Pan Dehai was overwhelmed by a mammoth sense of the universe, believing in the idea of a superhuman. Mao Xuhui loathed beauty, praising truth instead as the primary force, especially the cruel inner reality of a tumultuous soul.[14]

For the artists of the Southwest Art Group, art, precisely speaking, was something rooted not in an abstract human being, but rather in a specific person. Their art and lives were to be resolved as a whole, and thus art epitomized a grand soul (*dalinghun*).

Activism was foregrounded. Though this was a feature of all the avant-garde groups of the '85 Movement, the practice of the current of life artists

was particularly characterized by activism, and action was the highest objective of their art. In the preface to the brochure for the "Third Exhibition of New Specific Images" ("Xin juxiang disanjie zhan") of the Southwest Art Group, the artists wrote, "You will not be able to act, if you are not aware that the first priority of human life is action."[15] With this consciousness of activism, the artists devoted and even exhausted themselves in the quest to overcome any political barriers or economic difficulties.

When postmodernism reached its peak in the Euro-American art world, and idealism and modernism had been undermined by various deconstructive methods, the Chinese art world of the 1980s, notably the rationalist painting and current of life schools, moved in a totally different direction. Although there was considerable disagreement between rationalist painting and the current of life tendency, as well as some conceptualist groups, such as Xiamen Dada, the main purpose of the avant-garde groups was to question orthodox ideology. This questioning was not meant in the way of destruction or deconstruction, as in the case of Mao's Red Guard. Instead, there was a demand for the reconstruction of the cultural spirit in the 1980s, geared toward reform and modernity. The "humanism" of the '85 Movement, therefore, drove the avant-garde toward devotion to rediscovering human nature without expressing a destructive attitude. Perhaps the Cultural Revolution destroyed too much, and the post-Cultural Revolution generation had complained too much. It therefore followed that this was a time to reconstruct. All Western influence, no matter whether modernist or postmodernist, could serve in this project. Thus, the '85 Movement, in particular all the *renwen* groups, was an idealistic, total modernity project. For them, art was not merely material production, but rather a program for reestablishing culture following a period of great destruction and trauma.

Metaphor One: The Thinker and the Apple

Rationalist painting often used the compositional model of a man thinking. The "thinkers" in the rationalist paintings were the artists themselves, without any concrete, individualized facial features; they were universal figures representing the '85 generation. At the beginning of the '85 Movement, these "thinker" subjects appeared quite often, sometimes along with images of apples, or with a book (or something like a paper text) or sometimes a cup of water on a table. Stylistically, they combined realism and surrealism. For a generation that read philosophy and contemplated abstract and metaphysical ideas, these images were essential metaphors. The apple was a metaphor of knowledge and enlightenment, while the book and the water were metaphors for the resources of knowledge and thinking.

This typology first emerged with the new academic generation, in particular in the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou, during the first half of 1985. It spread with the emergence of rationalist painting in the avant-garde groups nationwide.

In early 1985, a group of recent art school graduates executed several works on the theme of awakening from the Dark Ages. One example was Zhang Qun and Meng Luding's *In the New Era: Revelations of Adam and Eve* (see figure 3.5), which was displayed in the 1985 International Youth Art Exhibition in Beijing, where it sparked a controversy over its subject matter, as well as for its depiction of nudity. The artists used the biblical story of Adam and Eve tasting the forbidden fruit as a metaphor for China's youth, who had already begun to awaken. The young woman holding an apple broke out of the picture's frame, and the young man awaited a taste of the apple. The palace door behind the nude figures, as well as the mountain with the Dunhuang Buddhist caves in the background, suggested the opportunities open to the new generation. In an article entitled "Awakening in the New Era," the artists advocated a reevaluation of the past, and of reality, in the context of the "new era" of opening and reform.[16] Rather than retreating to the outdated countryside and taking the world of "the other" as a theme, as the rustic painters did, the artists of the '85 Movement chose to directly comment on Chinese modernity. The new generation positioned themselves to face society directly with a metaphor involving more self-consciousness, urban environments, and the metaphysical state of their

Figure 5.4
Li Guijun, *Studio*, 1985.

own generation. In Li Guijun's *Studio*, the painter on the left seems to think rather than paint, while the young painter on the right is reading a book and the young woman in the middle is listening. The atmosphere in the studio seems to have nothing to do with art, rather philosophy, and the artists are concerned with meditation rather than painting.

There was a historical, religious, and cultural dislocation present in their approach. For instance, in Christian iconography the apple is a symbol of original sin. In 1980s China, it was a symbol of enlightenment. Many artworks also used the cross, the symbol of Christ's sacrifice, to imply a new intellectual spirit. The painting was a space in which the birth of Christianity, Renaissance humanism, and current Chinese modernity were all conflated in an integrative, metaphorical composition. For the Chinese avant-garde, it was a historical space, framed by "a particular time, a specific space and choice."[17] A number of artworks with similar themes were made at this time by new academic students. For example, a younger artist from Hunan province, Yuan Qingyi, created an oil painting, *The Spring Is Coming* (*Chuntian laile*), in which a young man gazes back to his table on which an apple and a book are laid. We cannot see his face; the back view of a thinker was very commonly used in paintings during this period. The anonymous, faceless angle served to make the figure a symbol for everyman, even when depicted with a typical realistic technique. Although, in the painting, we are not able to see his emotional state or read his facial expressions, we can imagine a positive attitude by considering the pose. In this instance, looking back is a specifically Chinese futurist vision, not a backward gesture, because the book and the apple are metaphors for the future and the spring.

In his essay "I and 'I' and … ," Yuan Qingyi explained this "self-portrait": "I first enter into abstract thought, and from there I find a quiet attitude. If the artist stands in the position of the Dao, he can expand people's thoughts from tiny details into the entire universe." Thus, the space of the canvas is not a place for living but rather an unlimited space for thought. Yuan also believed there were things in common between traditional Daoist philosophy and Sartre's existentialism.[18]

By comparing this work with a 1980 oil painting with a similar title, *Spring Has Come* (*Chunfeng yijing suxing*) by He Duoling, a scar painter, we may find the crucial difference between these two narratives about the "coming spring." In He Duoling's painting, a village girl sits in a field facing the viewer with a sorrowful, emotional expression. Here too the "spring" is a suggestion of the future, but the girl is representative of the passive, wounded Chinese people who need the revitalizing spring to rescue them from the dormant past (and the current status quo). In Yuan's painting, the younger man is a master; he is in charge of his fate and thinking about, as well as being involved with, the generative energy of the coming spring.

Figure 5.5

Yuan Qingyi, *The Spring Is Coming*, 1985.

Figure 5.6

He Duoling, *Spring Has Come*, 1981.

Figure 5.7
Geng Jianyi, *Two People under the Lamplight*, 1985.

Geng Jianyi, an oil painting student from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art who later became one of the leading figures of the Pool Society, gave one of his paintings the title *Two People under the Lamplight*. In this work, a young man holding a newspaper and a young woman are seated facing the viewer, with a cup on the table; there are no features to indicate any expression of individual emotion, nor is there any gender differentiation, with the exception of the hair. They are just modern young people without even any indication of their nationality. In this sense, they may be considered thinkers and universalists, typologically speaking.

Some have tended to define this as a surrealist painting. It has a realistic theme with a spontaneous composition in which the scene takes place, although it is very unspecific about the location and time. Light seems also to be used as a metaphor (of enlightenment, or thought possibilities), rather than a realistically portrayed artificial light in an interior space. It is this stylistic approach with certain unreal elements that makes it difficult to define as either illusionistic or representational in style. This is a fundamental feature of rationalist painting. It may come from the traditional aesthetic phrase, "the approach is in between likeness and unlikeness" (*miao zai si yu busi zhijian*).

Zuo Zhengyao, a rationalist painter from Hubei province, also presented the "thinker/apple" typological metaphor in his contemporaneous painting *Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wife* (*Laozi Zhuangzi he qizi*). In the painting, Laozi and Zhuangzi, the ancient philosophical founders of Daoism, are seated in a garden-like place along with a woman, who is holding an apple. They are all facing us, but all wear a similar expression. This is another story that took place in an Oriental Garden of Eden. According to the artist, the three different gestures of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the wife present different philosophies about the apple. Zhuangzi says, "If the apple matures, it will fall down itself." Therefore he is waiting without doing anything. Laozi says, "Let me have my plate and knife ready." Therefore he is holding them in his hand. Qizi (the wife), an Oriental version of Eve who is also a philosopher (as we can tell from the character *zi* in her name), says nothing, but randomly picks an apple from the tree and eats it. Qizi is a stand-in for the young generation, whose attitude of activism defies any doctrine or rules.[19]

Figure 5.8

Zuo Zhengyao, *Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wife*, 1985.

Figure 5.9
Wang Guangyi, *The Frozen North Pole: No. 30,* 1985.

Wang Guangyi, in his *Frozen North Pole* series (1985), also made use of this "thinker/apple" model. In one painting, two people, again with no gender indicated, are seated in front of a table with some small fruits (possibly apple) on it, while the background is the frozen North Pole. The painter attempts to freeze everything except spirituality, thinking, and meditation.

Gu Wenda, another leading figure in rationalist painting, made *Self-Portrait with a Window Behind* in 1985. Here the artist's self-portrait is rendered in a repetitive format, seated rigidly in a gesture of meditation while his hand holds an apple.

Interestingly, most of the "thinker/apple" paintings were made in 1985, without any evidence to show an exchange of ideas, or indeed any

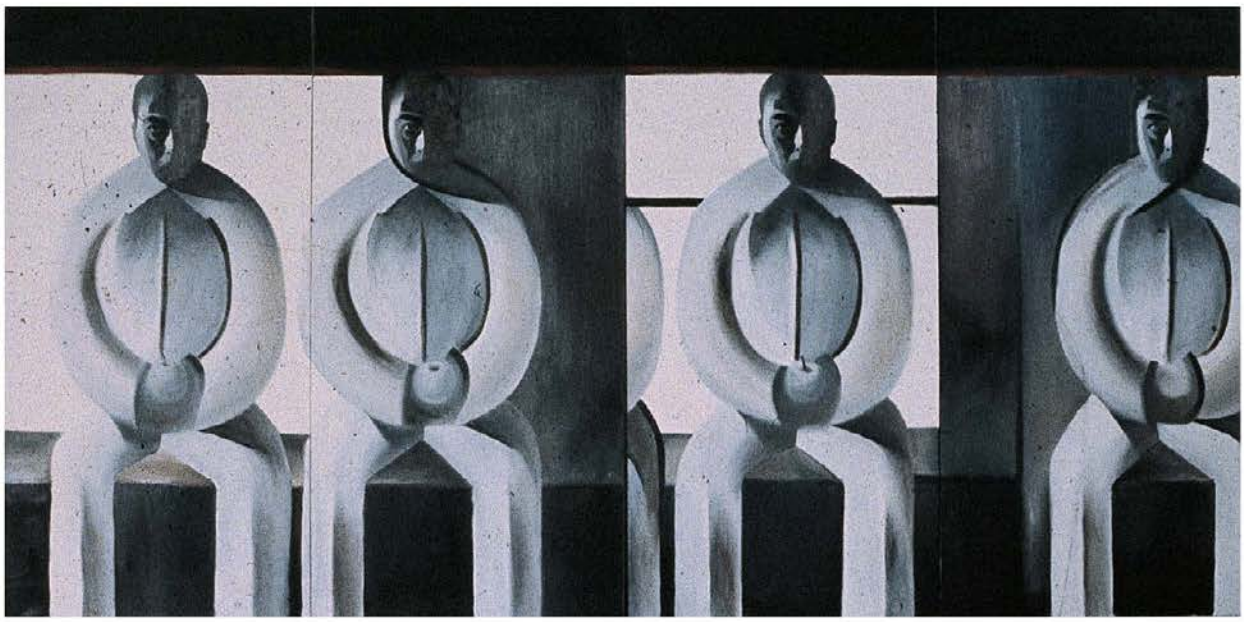


Figure 5.10
Gu Wenda, *Self-Portrait with a Window Behind,* 1985.

Figure 5.11

Zhang Jianjun, *Human Beings and Their Clock*, 1985–1986.

communication between the painters. In this kind of realist-surrealist painting, each artist represented him or herself as thinker, philosopher, or cultural mediator. The spaces in which they stand, or more commonly sit, are very similar in the use of lighting sources such as lamps, windows, the sun, or in some cases a clock. The locations vary from an empty room to an open landscape, a purist garden, or even somewhere outside the human world, as in the heavenly scene depicted in Zhang Jianjun's *Human Beings and Their Clock*.

The ultimate purpose of these paintings is the glorification of the new man who grandly carries out the goals of a new, enthusiastic humanism. After the *Frozen North Pole* series of 1985, Wang Guangyi created his *Postclassical Series* of 1987, in which he employed and modified religious or grand-manner themes from classical Western paintings. In *The Death of Marat*, 1987, Wang abstracted the figure of the martyred French revolutionary leader and thinker Jean-Paul Marat from Jacques-Louis David's iconic 1793 painting. He doubled it in a symmetrically opposed composition painted in a muted palette of grays. This rationalization of sacrifice as an instrument of a more perfect spirituality uses art like religion to depict a purified ideal Chinese spirit and a healthy, noble life. For Wang, the tragedy of Marat is an example of spiritual transcendence: "This series of paintings, called *Postclassicism*, are the best works of my mature period. Their significance and cultural value is that they exhibit the idea that the aim and spiritual significance possessed by life is higher than life itself, upon which lie all the lofty qualities of man."[20]

The tragedy of Marat, for Wang, is also the glorification of a noble spirit, a necessary qualification for entry into the period's "thought" culture. In the same essay, he poignantly asked, "What is a noble

Figure 5.12

Wang Guangyi, *The Death of Marat*, 1987.

spirit? It is a special conviction held by a man about his position in the universe, the only compelling force for the revival of the whole culture."[21]

Metaphor Two: "Frozen Land," "Primeval Land," and "Yellow Earth"

This sort of "thinker's" subjectivity was taken to such extremes in the middle of the 1980s that human subjects became inadequate to it. Only the language of metaphor and meditative forms could represent this extremely inflated subjectivity. Therefore, rationalist and current of life painters sought the grand partners of the earth and the universe as foci for their elite meditations, and we can see everywhere in their writings such terms as "universe," "earth," "nature," "eternity," "solemnity," and "the sublime." On the rational level of the Dao, the natural landscape and the human figure confront each other. This makes us think of the world of ancient Chinese landscape painting, especially the great painters of the Northern Song, who worked in what scholars call the monumental style. With the exception of Gu Wenda, Ren Jian, and a few other ink painters who committed themselves to reconstructing a kind of new monumental ink painting (what I call universal current or *yuzhouliu*), most rationalist painters rarely used traditional landscape techniques.[22]

The pursuit of this visual language led to two special characteristics. One is the complete elimination of the specificity of the individual (body, gender, emotion, psychology). The other is the strengthening and emphasizing of universal human characteristics, until the human figure becomes robotically uniform. For example, in Cheng Xiaoyu's painting *The East*, even the most fleeting moments in human existence have been made abstract. Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi painted what seem to be

Figure 5.13

Cheng Xiaoyu, *The East*, 1985.

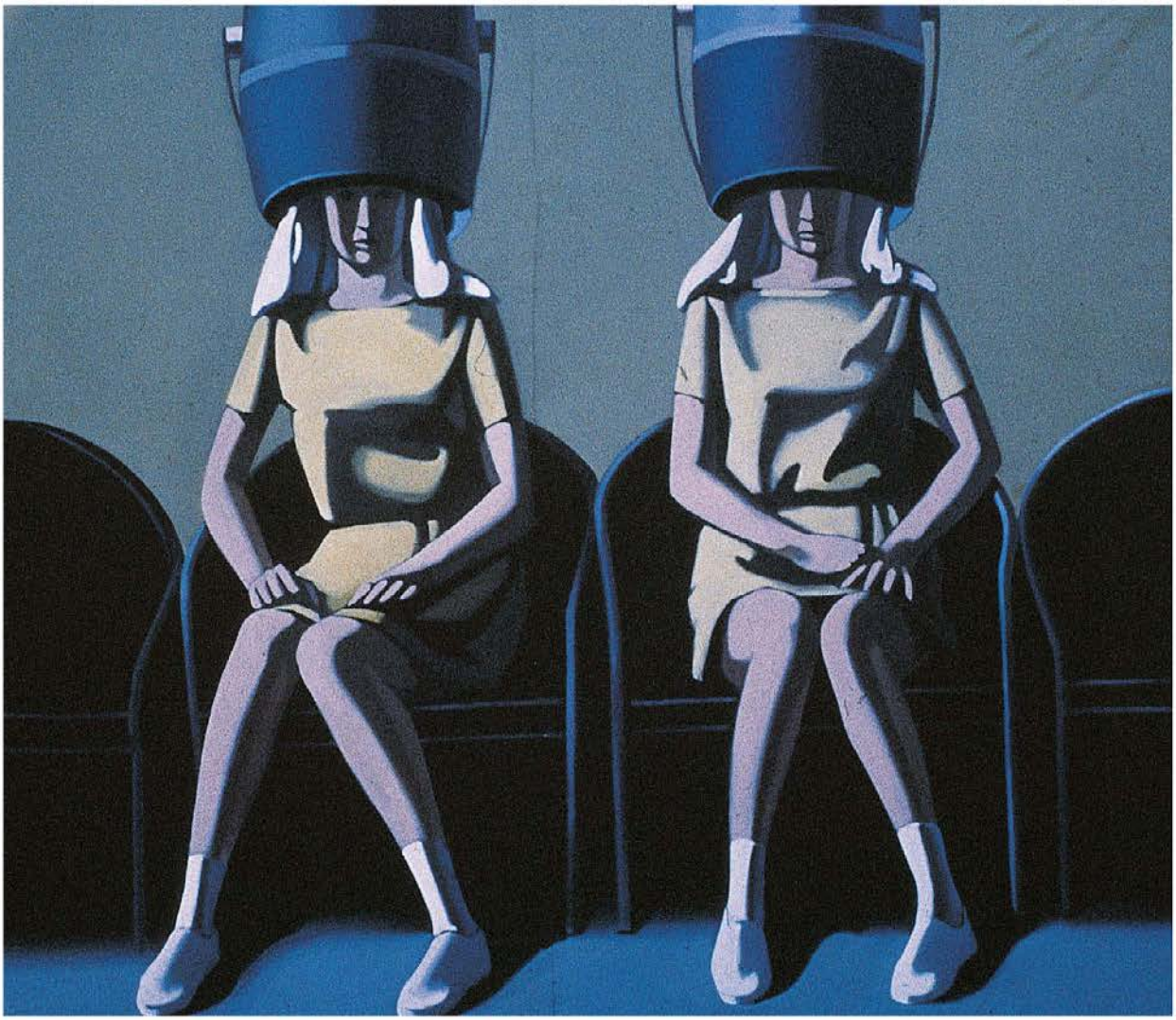


Figure 5.14
Geng Jianyi, *Haircut, No. 4—Fashion and Style in the Summer of 1985*, 1985.

aliens or extraterrestrials. In the context of 1980s rationalist painting, nearly all human forms reside in abstract scenes and spaces that lack distinguishing characteristics.

Characters are often inserted into "universal" scenes without any concrete backgrounds. The background is often empty, and the colors are often blue or otherwise cold, to hint at the presence of a higher-level reality. The earth and sky become the background for the characters in these paintings. The earth, particularly high plateaus, often gives a sense of life, and this sense of life is but a projection of the artist's ideals.

Works in this category include Wang Guangyi's *Frozen North Pole* series, Ren Jian's *Primeval Chaos*, Ding Fang's *Yellow Earth* series, and Gu Wenda's as well as other ink painters' universal stream paintings.

As discussed earlier, the Northern Art Group, represented by Shu Qun, Wang Guangyi, and Ren Jian, used the frigid temperatures of Manchuria as both a background for their paintings and a projection of their spirits. They all lived in northern China, and they sought a theoretical foundation for their region's culture. Wang Guangyi intended his 1985 *Frozen North Pole* series to signify "a kind of beauty of sublime reason which contains [a] constant, harmonious feeling of humanity," noting that "here, both creator and the created are moved by the atmosphere of the sublime and by dignity, rather than by common aesthetic and visual pleasure."[23] In these paintings, orderly, identical figures face the future and are only seen from behind. The background resembles the frozen land and mountains of the Arctic. He wrote about this concept in one of his essays:

> I am very sensitive to the first signs of the ups and downs of a culture, for my life began in the cold and pure land of the north. The tragic scene generated by the solid image of the northern land, a pure spiritual land, made me spiritually feel the restlessness and horror of life in front of the hostile and cold nature. Therefore, I instinctively transformed my restlessness and confusion to a surrealistic state that transcended myself.

Figure 5.15

Wang Guangyi, *Frozen North Pole*, 1985.

Figure 5.16

Ren Jian, *Primeval Chaos* (detail), 1986–1987.

> If the creativity of mankind can be deemed to be the manifestation of an individual's reaction to the changes of the universe, the art forms created by an individual's freedom shall possess a perception of spiritual transcendence. Behind these forms is hidden the prototype of life's tension, which is totally different from the aesthetic concept of "the pleasure of representation." This life tension develops along an upward, spiritual path, constituting the whole chain of humanity's culture. The prophetic art forms created by some noble healthy persons can undoubtedly serve as examples of the development of a culture of human beings.
>
> My own art forms can, without any doubt, also serve as examples. The solid, Polar Region in the north, one of my early art forms, expresses a bright yet serious rationality of life's expansion.[24]

The land and earth in Ren Jian's paintings are even more mysterious and monumental than in Wang Guangyi's work. Ren Jian devoted himself to exploring and presenting Eastern mysteries, and created abstract forms or images based on traditional Chinese concepts about the beginnings of the human world. A series of paintings dating from 1985 to 1987 gave form to his philosophical reconfiguration of the universe. He created various symbols and signs with references from the Book of Changes (*Yi jing*), a Daoist text, making a thirty-meter-long painting in 1986–1987 in the form of a traditional ink-and-wash hand scroll. The painting, entitled *Primeval Chaos*, used imaginary images to describe the origins of life in a primordial era.[25] This primordial universe, however, has nothing to do with archaeological study, nor is it a mythical narrative in a visual form; rather it is a metaphor employed to transcend the existing aesthetic pleasure of the "representation of reality" (*fanying xianshi*). For Ren Jian, to imagine a primeval land through a peculiar, or specific, visual form is a systematic attempt to liquidate the cliché of realism and representational theory. In this, rationalist painting seems to share something with Western modernism at the turn of the twentieth century. The difference is that the Chinese style never goes to extremes, but always stays in between pure abstraction and mimicry.

Similar to Ren Jian were the Shanghai painters Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Chen Zhen, Zhang Jianjun, and others. The difference is that the Shanghai painters portrayed the primeval land in a more symbolic form by visualizing Oriental philosophy about the beginning of the universe. Chen Zhen

Figure 5.17

Chen Zhen, *A Painting about Mind Moving*, 1984.

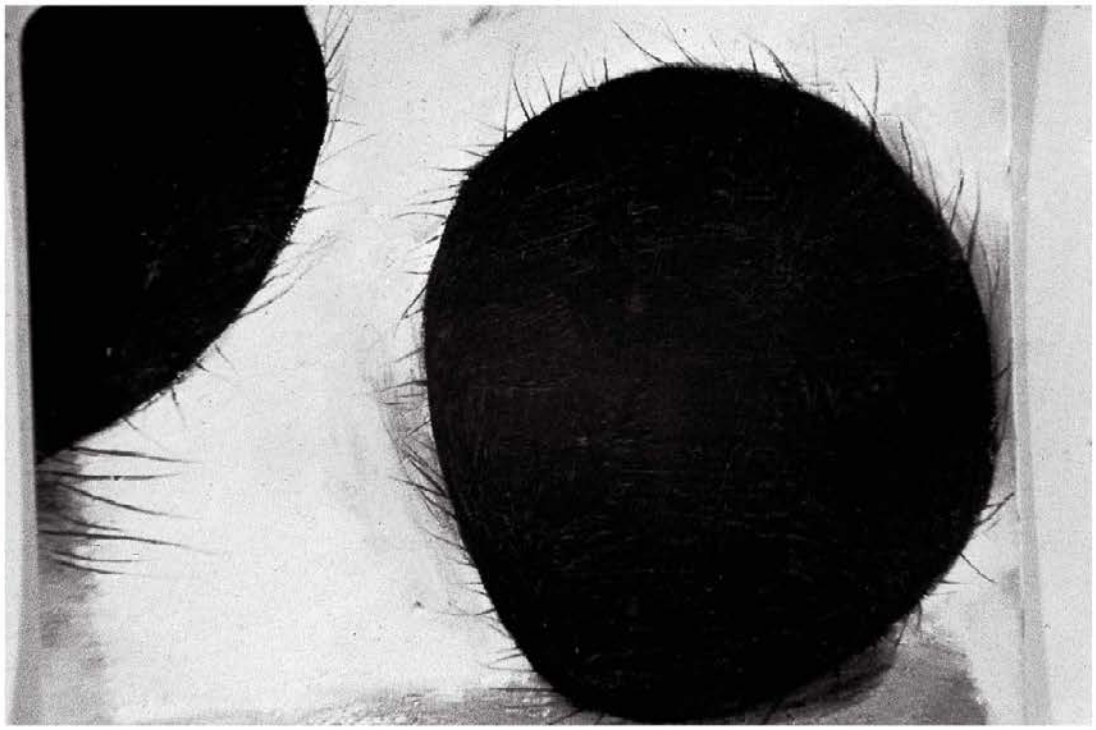


Figure 5.18

Li Shan, *Expanding Series, No. 1*, 1984.

Figure 5.19

Yu Youhan, *Circle Series*, 1984.

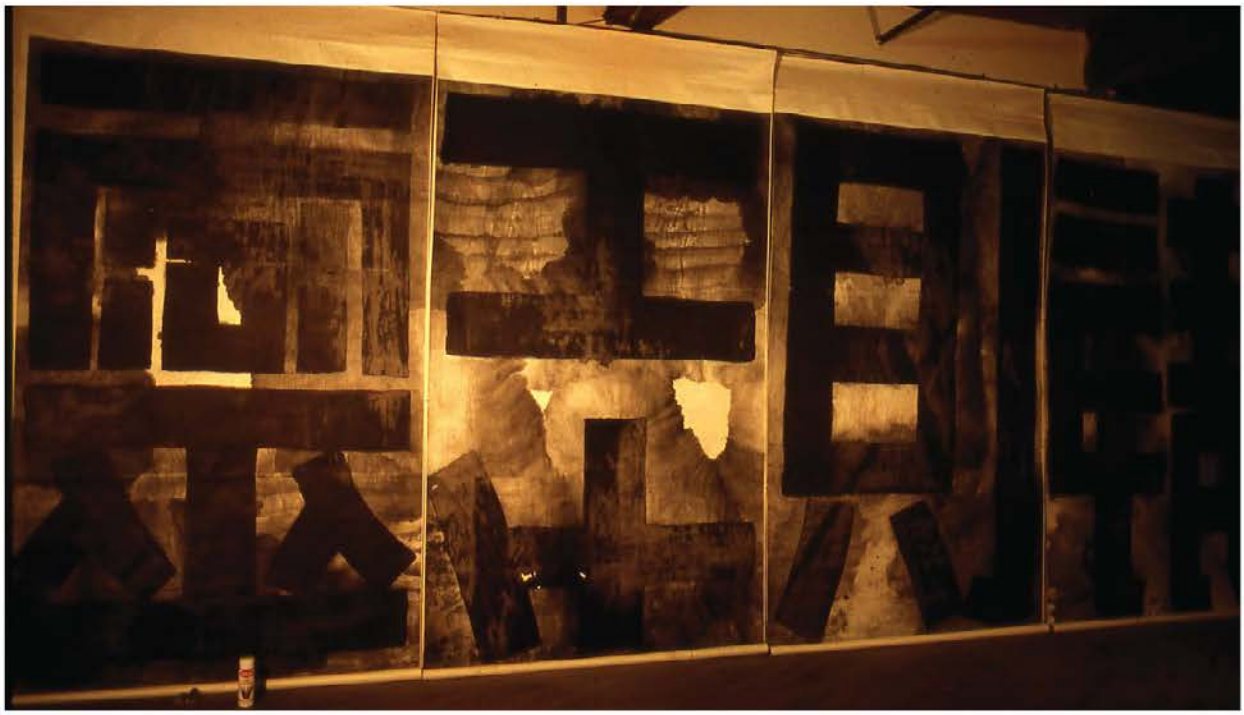


Figure 5.20

Gu Wenda, *Mythos of Lost*, 1985.

was a painter who was extremely interested in both Chinese and Western philosophy and wanted to demonstrate his interpretation of the structure of the universe, including extraterrestrials. He used dots to combine *qi* or "energy" and divinatory symbols to suggest certain motions in what he called the "stream of *qi*" (*qiliutu*). Chen moved to Paris in 1986, and soon he gave up this Oriental philosophical dream and shifted to an interest in postmodernism and the issue of cultural identity.[26] Li Shan was also interested in the Oriental mysteries and a certain pseudo-abstract style. The circles in Li Shan and Yu Youhan's paintings, however, have nothing to do with modernist geometry, though the philosophical code reminds us of modernism. The soft, reserved round shapes, and the ink paintings of lines and dots, all suggest an Oriental spontaneity and a hint of human life and the body.

These Shanghai painters all sought to use the mysterious universe of ancient Eastern philosophy to rid culture of the previous philistine tendency of socialist representation. Consequently, abstract symbols thoroughly obscured human forms in their works, as the human form—most notably that of Mao—had been the basis for all propagandistic representation in the past. Physical landscapes were ultimately aimed at presenting metaphysical ends, replete with the internal realities of these Chinese new "humanist" thinkers.

In the middle of the 1980s, otherworldly scenes also became important material for avant-garde ink-and-wash painting. This tendency made a departure from both traditional landscape painting and the revolutionary representational landscape. A number of painters were involved in the ink movement. In Zhejiang province, Gu Wenda became the primary representative of an avant-garde ink-and-wash painting movement called scholarly painting (*xuezhe huihua*), which addressed painting as a scholarly study. The painting's subject matter commonly involved characters, land, and a hint of the human body, joined together in a harmonious composition suggesting an otherworldly or surreal place. But Gu's form of otherworldly landscape was rather a representation of the human spirit (see chapter 7); here the land serves *li*, or principle, and idea. He believed that the paintings of the Northern Song Dynasty were the most valuable, virile, and sublime.[27]

Figure 5.21

Ding Fang, *Drawing of a Landscape,* 1984.

Figure 5.22

Ding Fang, *The Summons and Birth*, 1988.

On the other hand, he thought the literati painting style, which followed the Northern Song, was weak and powerless. This criticism of the literati painting of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when Chinese reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao launched the art movement called the "revolution in art."[28]

Ding Fang was another important rationalist painter of the 1980s. If we say that the earthly and otherworldly landscapes discussed above were similar inasmuch as they explored purely spiritual questions, Ding Fang's landscapes were more concrete, showing the soul and flesh of a nation, as well as a portrait of the identity of Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s. Ding Fang was born in Wugong, Shaanxi province, in northwestern China, in 1956. He and seven other artists, including Yang Zhilin, a teacher and his colleague at Nanjing Normal University, Xu Lei, Shen Qin, Zhai Xiaogang, Guan Ce, Cao Xiaodong, and Xu Yihui, decided to organize a new group named the Red Journey.[29]

Ding Fang's first artistic endeavors took place between 1982 and 1985, when he worked with rustic realist painting. His rustic painting, however, did not exoticize the lives of ordinary people. Instead, Ding sought to explore the rational structure of nature through images of the constant stillness of the land and depictions of the cycle of human life. In these paintings the land seems covered not by soil, but rather by solid metal.

In 1985, Ding Fang abandoned rustic themes. He returned to the Yellow Plateau in his home province, and while there he shifted his attention away from capturing the essence of the land and the lives of the people who live on it. Instead, Ding sought a symbolic mode of expression that would strengthen national culture. His representative works of this stage are the paintings entitled the *Castle Series* (1985). They depict the land of the Yellow Plateau turned to ruined castles and combined with parts of the Great Wall and villages. Ding Fang describes his pursuits of this period by saying, "I have been looking for a spirit hidden in the northern world." Elsewhere he said, "What I am striving for is an unsophisticated, realistic style which aims to express the spirit of the north by a simple and solid artistic language. These realist techniques are forceful even if regarded as outdated. But I still insist that the silent greatness inherent in the northern lands is the foundation for this art to enter into the future culture of mankind."[30] In these works, Ding created monumental compositions by combining intricate brushstrokes with a giant landscape.

This leads us to think of the twelfth-century art historian Mi Fu's (1052–1107) appraisal of the tenth-century painter Fan Kuan. Commenting on Fan's brushstrokes, Mi said Fan "used a great deal of ink and did not distinguish between rocks and earth [*tushi bufen*]. No one in the present dynasty surpassed him. His mountain streams spring from the depths of nowhere; his waters seem to have a voice of their own."[31] The surface of the earth in Ding's paintings is the skin of the national soul, like that of the German artist Anselm Kiefer, who has committed himself to painting the national soul of the former West Germany. Like Wang Guangyi's, Ding Fang's new works of 1987 and 1988 had an extremely romantic tendency. He used bright colors and exaggerated emotions to emphasize a quasi-religious approach. The titles of works in this series include: *The Summons and Birth*, *Will and Sacrifice*, *The Enlightenment of the Original Spirit* (*Yuanchuang jingshen de qishi*), *Self-Transcendence*, and *The Power of Tragedy*. In *The Summons and Birth*, the artist transformed the land and city that he had drawn before into a godlike face that shines on and summons humans. The dominant color is gold, symbolizing divine light.[32]

Metaphor Three: Wild Earth and Minority Body as Eternal

The current of life artists from western China sought a different way to represent the grandeur of human life by employing a metaphor of their individual experiences of nature, land, and native people, rather than attempting to transcend reality as the rationalist painters had. Therefore, the metaphorical language of "land" for the artists of the current of life movement was not the Northern Art Group's "frozen land," the Shanghai painters' primeval symbols, nor Ding Fang's "yellow earth," but rather the virginal "wild soil" (*retu*) of southwest China. Wild in this case meant original, simple, and uncivilized. Although the frozen land is also original and simple, it was

civilized in the metaphorical sense as interpreted by the rationalist painters. This is partially because of the geographical location of Yunnan province in the southwest, where minorities still live in the old agricultural lifestyle.

One may define this approach as another form of rustic art. In fact, there was a connection between the Southwest Art Group and rustic painting. First, Zhang Xiaogang and Ye Yongqing, two of the major members of the group, were the classmates of Luo Zhongli, Cheng Conglin, and He Duoling, who were the leading scar and rustic artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In fact, Zhang Xiaogang was involved in rustic painting in the later 1970s, but his painting did not get as much attention as that of his classmates from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art. It was very natural for Zhang and Ye to carry on with a similar rustic mentality in the practice of the Southwest Art Group. Second, Zhang, Ye, and Mao Xuhui were all born in Kunming, Yunnan province; they shared a similar regional interest in portraying their own land and people.

The rustic interest of the Southwest Art Group in the middle of the 1980s, however, was quite different from that of the rustic painting initiated in Sichuan in the late 1970s. The latter used the rustic life as a "true life" to comment on the previous political life and to address humanism, departing from Mao's political and class struggle. The former, however, attempted to infuse their "neo-rusticism" with a much wilder and abstract appearance in order to perform a metaphorical and philosophical meditation on what it means to be human. This quality, above all, distinguished the approach of the Southwest Art Group from that of the rationalist painters. Furthermore, the former respected and believed in concrete individual experiences and intuition, at the expense of rational thought. This by no means suggests that the current of life and rationalist painting had no common philosophical interests. On the contrary, both proclaimed the possibility of transcending individual and phenomenological life, and both pursued a grand soul (*dalinghun*). Therefore, both made a clear departure from the political life of the post-Cultural Revolution period, and both employed their land as a metaphor in the philosophy of total cultural modernity.

This approach involved a kind of meditation, the meditation that dug deep into individual souls rather than observing irrelevant social phenomena. In the mid-1980s, Mao Xuhui's art began with an extremely wild and concrete personal focus. He worked at a store, producing marketing advertisement boards, and read novels by Franz Kafka. He was bored with life, his spirits remaining low even when he got back to his living quarters. There, he would stand by his window watching the road lamps and pedestrians. If this could not disperse his loneliness, he would depict his ennui on canvas, painting restlessness, love, dilapidated life, and the feeling of falling. He became extremely interested in pure instinct. In about 1985 he wrote, "When I put into the magic bucket of artistic form the things in life that disturb people, that are irrational, that are disorderly, that have a strong presence even though they are indefinable, then I feel delight … driven by primitive impulse and desire, I have to break out of my inner world by blowing off my head, my soul, and all my secrets with a completely vented open mind. After harshly beating all the monsters on a gallows, I then cheerfully leave."[33]

In this period, Mao Xuhui painted the *Guishan Series* (*Guishan xilie*). Guishan is an area where many minorities have lived since prehistoric times. Sheep, land, trees, and minority people were the major images in his compositions. Often, the people hold tree branches or other agricultural symbols in their hands. In *Guishan Series: Encounter on Red Soil*, a couple gaze at each other in silence. The tree branch the man offers the woman is a symbol of the love that comes from the land and is at the root of all human beings.

Like Mao and Pan Dehai, Zhang Xiaogang resorted to drink as a result of his disappointment with life. This influenced his art: the major themes of his work during the mid-1980s were focused on death and dreams. His drinking sprees eventually led to stomach troubles that caused him to be hospitalized. At the hospital, he was confined to a white bed in a white room and had to take white tablets every day. During that period, he produced a series of disquieting sketches. The images were no longer of grasslands, but rather of monster after monster, interspersed with falling bedsheets chased by menaced souls. At that time he wrote, "Mankind's

Figure 5.23

Mao Xuhui, *Guishan Series: Encounter on Red Soil*, 1985.

love has been divided into two parts. The first half enjoy their colorful daily life, while the other half move toward death driven by a self-propelling force."[34] For Zhang, dreams—especially the nightmares he experienced in the hospital—were the moments in which he experienced enlightenment, mentally floating between death and life.[35]

Zhang Xiaogang, like Mao Xuhui, abandoned the tendency toward self-indulgent expression in order to focus on reality. He attacked the human distortions that society caused by glorifying the pastoral, simple life. In *Eternal Life*, painted in 1988, a ceremonial image of minority people surrounded by animals and wigwams depicts a celebration of "wildness." This ritualistic, ageless life became the major theme of Zhang's paintings during the late 1980s. A similar ceremony was captured in another painting, *Yin Yang Cycle*, which portrayed a couple who share the same lower extremity kneeling in prayer. This is reminiscent of the ancient god and goddess, Fu Xi and Nu Wa, whose joined lower body was that of a snake. The painting symbolizes the noble purity of rustic life, which the artist, considering himself a modern man, identified as the true and original human consciousness.

This kind of imagery, often based on experiences in Tibet, Inner Mongolia, or other remote areas, appeared frequently in the 1980s. For instance, Su Xinping, a painter from Inner Mongolia and a young teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Art in late 1980s, frequently painted Mongolian people sleeping, drinking, and walking under a magic shadow, which was a metaphor for the psychological impact of modernity in general. Some of these works undoubtedly implied a conflict between the idealized "primitive life" and modern civilization. This conflict was basic to the psychology of the artists, and is particularly acute in contemporary urban China. On the one hand, the artists wished to oppose modern society for its suppression of human nature, thus their praise for the pure and simple life; on the other hand, they believed the people who lived this "primitive life" in remote areas lacked the ability to change modern society. The praise of "primitivism," pastoralism, and naturalism in the works of the artists of the Southwest Art Group, called nature consciousness (*ziran yishi*), was not an exotic or irrelevant subject matter to them but rather a supplement to urban modernization.[36]

Figure 5.24

Zhang Xiaogang, *Eternal Life*, 1988.

Figure 5.25

Zhang Xiaogang, *Yin Yang Cycle*, 1988.

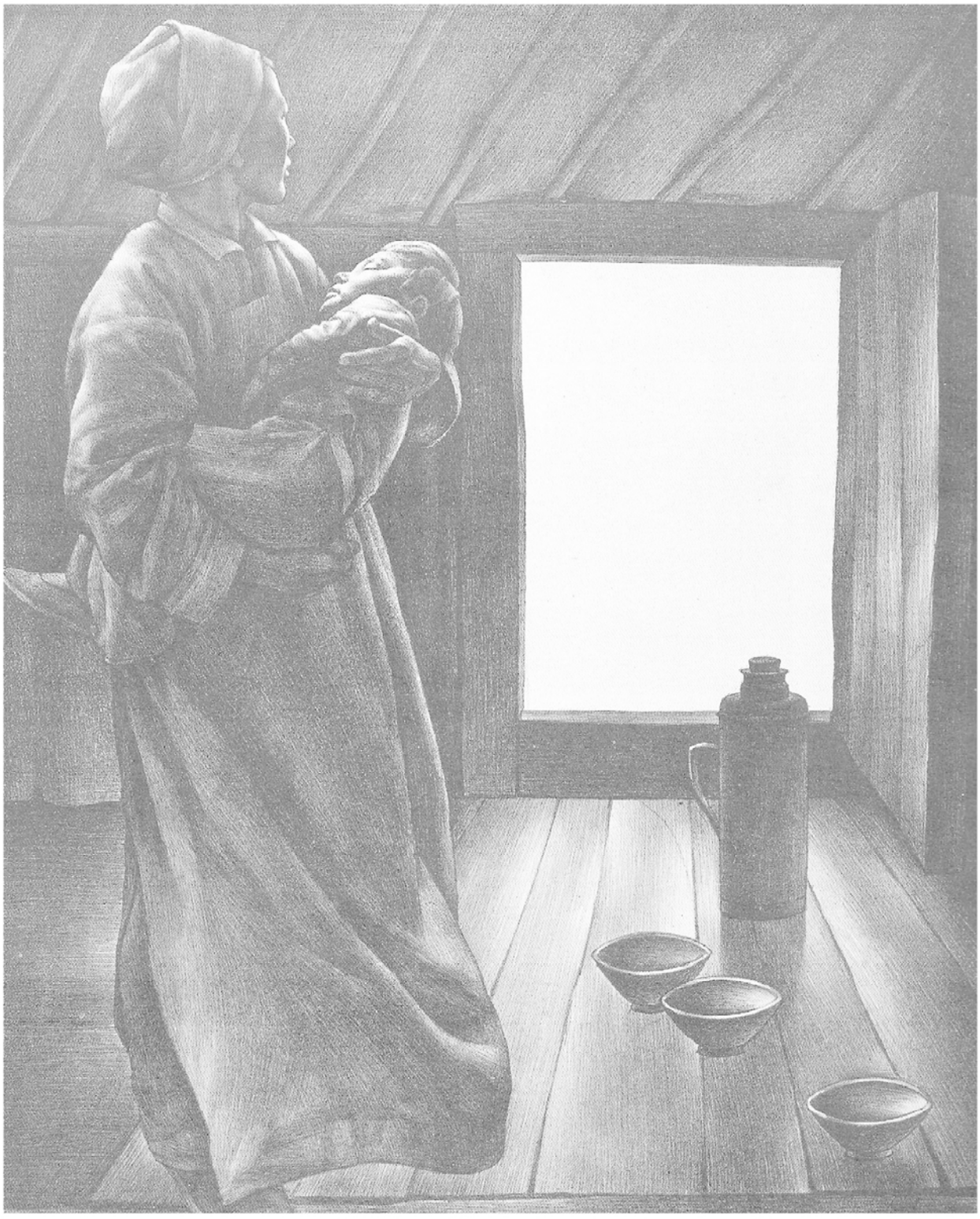


Figure 5.26

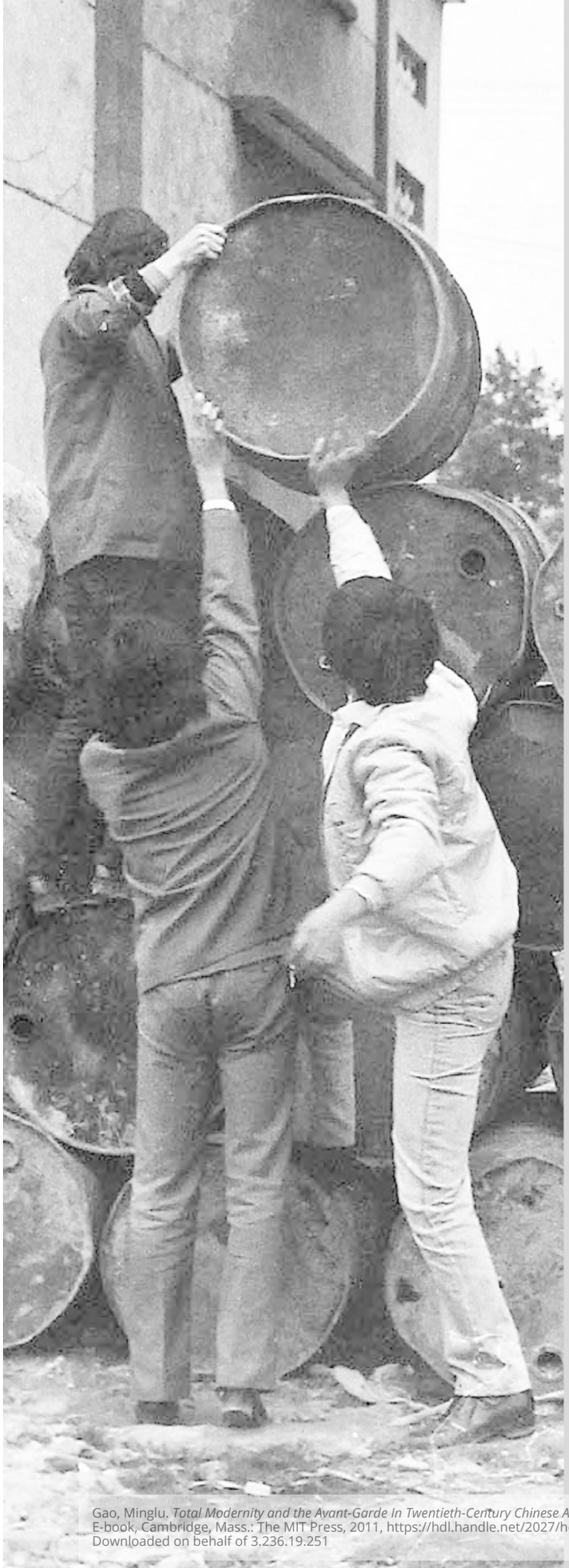
Su Xinping, *Wait,* 1989.

By 1988, a "socio-capitalist" society had begun to develop in China, and intellectuals were becoming fatigued from dreaming of an ideal future. The artists of the Northern Art Group, such as Shu Qun and Ren Jian, abandoned their earlier idealism. Like many of their fellow artist-intellectuals, they moved away from grand themes to undertake specific analyses of the social environment. By 1988, Wang Guangyi shifted his attention away from idealism and grand themes as well, to initiate a more specific investigation of reality. The earliest hint of this shift is seen in his 1987 *Red Reason and Black Reason* series, in which red-and-black grids imply a pop-type approach, or cut-and-paste method, instead of a representational and utopian approach. He started to criticize "the modern myth" (*xiandai shenhua*), which may refer both to Mao's revolutionary period and to the later avant-garde iconoclastic utopias. In stark contrast to his earlier humanist tendencies, he proclaimed that we had to "liquidate the enthusiasm of humanism" (*qingli renwen reqing*) and that art was created only to achieve stardom in media society and the market.[37] He called art a strategy (*youxi*), and Andy Warhol's pop, as well as the hypercritical pop of the British circle around Richard Hamilton, became his models.

Wang created a series of portraits of Mao Zedong; in February 1989, just four months before the Tian'anmen incident, he caused a sensation by exhibiting *Mao Zedong No. 1* in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition (see figure 4.12). In this work, a grid was superimposed on an official portrait of Mao: the revolutionary leader and the utopia he stood for were imprisoned within the measurable confines of an analytic frame. Wang's technique harks back to the large-scale propagandist technique of employing a grid to enlarge and transfer a small-scale mock-up to a monumentally large portrait or propagandistic mural. This work might have been created with a critical intent rather than an overt commercial goal. Generally speaking, before the Tian'anmen democracy demonstrations of 1989, the avant-gardists of the '85 Movement had not yet become involved in the commercial marketing of art due to the lack of international outlets and institutional attention.

In his *Absolute Principle* of 1985, Shu Qun made use of the cross, the Christian symbol for representing a new order and idealism. In the late 1980s, however, he turned away from this vision and created a different version of *Absolute Principle.* In this version, he added three additional panels to the original painting, so that the Christian iconography and the grid progressively vanish. This series was displayed in 1989 in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition. The fadeout mirrors the demise of the intellectuals' idealism about the total modernity project.

Meanwhile, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi also shifted their attention from rationalist painting to conceptual art. In 1988, the transitional nature of deconstructivist theory began to permeate the artistic milieu's mentality. This shift occurred an entire year before the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition and the events of June 4. The consequent loss of idealism and disillusionment occurred significantly before the June 4 incident. It was in the early 1990s, though, that this mentality reached its apex and political pop and cynical realism became a major trend.[38] I will discuss this avant-garde transition issue in chapter 7.



6

Chan Meets Dada

Merging Destruction and Tradition in the Avant-Garde Mentality

Guannian Gengxin: Revolution in Ideas

The Chinese term *guannian* means "idea." Around late 1984 and early 1985, *guannian gengxin* became the most popular notion among the avant-gardists and the younger generation. It even had an impact on the circle of middle-aged academic artists. *Guannian gengxin* literally means to have a "revolution in ideas." After the Open Door policy and new painting trends emerged in the prior several years, the change of ideas became a fundamental issue in the development of Chinese contemporary art, as opposed to the mere substitution of themes or style. But what is *guannian* in the particular Chinese context? It first refers to a desire for further cultural exchange between China and the West. With a strong voice advocating greater openness and freedom in the creation of art, it became a common point of view in the literary and art worlds during the middle of the 1980s.[1] It entailed a pursuit of revolutionary ideas in the creation of art, rather than emphasizing material production. In this context, "ideas" are not concepts in the sense of Western conceptual art; rather it is concerned with promoting an avant-garde cultural revolution, often highly critical, in art.

Apart from the influential trend of a specifically Chinese form of humanism (*renwen*), discussed in the previous chapter, this avant-garde of ideas became the most radical art propagated by the '85 Movement. It first emerged in the middle of the 1980s, in tandem with the *renwen* tendencies of the '85 Movement. In my historic essay defining the '85 Movement, I divided the avant-garde groups into three elements. The first two were the previously discussed rationalist painting and current of life tendencies, which passionately engaged in "enthusiastic humanism" (*renwen jingshen*). The third element manifested as what I called a "revolution of ideas imbued with activism" (*guannian gengxin yu xingwei zhuyi*).[2]

The phenomenon of a revolution in ideas in the '85 Movement was inspired by Western contemporary art, including conceptual art, the name given to a North American and British art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as usual in the Chinese context, the purpose and the revolutionary logic are different from the Euro-American if one examines the comparative situations with any specificity.

The term "conceptual art" was translated into Chinese in two ways in the 1980s: "idea art" (*guannian yishu*) and "concept art" (*gainian yishu*). *Guannian* carries with it a much broader set of connotations than *gainian*. The former refers to the general meaning of mind-based or thought-based practice in a particular context, while the latter has a narrower definition of a specific notion. Chinese conceptual art is more accurately defined as idea art (*guannian yishu*), because the artists working in this vein were committed to examining broad cultural and social issues, rather than focusing on the internal concerns of art itself, as was the case in the first phase of Western conceptual art practiced during the late 1960s. For instance, the Art and Language group attempted to probe the relationship between words, objects, and images while studying the signification theories of French theorists such as Saussure, or later of Wittgenstein. In Chinese art, there has never been a theory that attempts to divide words from images, or study them separately. Due to the integral nature of calligraphic history, and the essential allegorical, metaphorical, and poetic coupling of words and images in the history of Chinese art, there is no Western historical relationship that can