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# Abstract Painting: The Formation of New Aesthetics in Post-Mao China

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In October 1980, the official art journal *Meishu* (Fine arts) published an article titled “On Abstract Beauty” by the artist Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010).<sup>1</sup> Referencing the French art terms *abstrait* (abstract) and *non-figuratif* (non-figurative), and the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Wu coined a new term, *chouxiangmei* (abstract beauty), defining it as purely artistic forms, such as lines, colors, and shapes (Wu 1980: 37). Wu emphasized the independence of these artistic forms, indicating his aim to question the long-held doctrine that art should serve political propaganda.

Wu’s artistic pursuit was made manifest in his landscape painting *Gaochang Ruins* (Gaochang yizhi, fig. 1) from 1981 in which he reduced the naturalistic depiction of the northwestern land to a flat plane composed of color blocks, curving lines, and scattered dots. Unlike the northwestern landscape in Shi Lu’s (1919–1982)<sup>2</sup> *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* (Zhuanzhan Shanbei, fig. 2), in which the grand red mountain under Mao Zedong’s (1893–1976) feet serves as a visual statement of his conquest of the new territory,<sup>3</sup> the landscape in Wu’s painting does not aim to politicize nature with symbolic redness or monumental size. Instead, it expresses the dynamic rhythms of curving lines. Though *Gaochang Ruins* is not purely abstract, it cancels political meanings and separates artistic forms from ideology-laden content, thus subverting the Soviet Union’s socialist realism that had dominated Chinese art during Mao’s rule (1949–1976).<sup>4</sup>

Wu’s advocacy of abstract beauty ignited a five-year debate over the legitimacy of modern abstract painting in the Chinese art world, drawing

<sup>1</sup>Wu Guanzhong studied modern Western painting at the National Hangzhou Art Academy between 1936 and 1942. He furthered his studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1948 and 1950. During Mao’s rule, Wu taught at Tsinghua University, the Beijing Art Normal Academy, and the Central Academy of Crafts and Arts. Wu is best known for his abstract landscape paintings (Farrer 1992).

<sup>2</sup>Shi Lu was an influential painter who played a significant role in modernizing Chinese ink painting. In 1955, he was appointed to oversee the design of the Chinese Pavilion at the Indian Industries Fair in India. In the following year, he represented China at the Afro-Asian Art Conference in Egypt (Andrews 1994: 105–109, 286–296; Hawks 2017: 139–179; Wang 2017).

<sup>3</sup>In the late 1950s, Shi Lu was commissioned to create paintings for the Great Hall of the People and the Museum of Revolutionary History. *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* was done for the museum (Andrews 1994: 236–238; Andrews/Shen 2012: 174–175).

<sup>4</sup>Socialist realism emerged in Russia in the wake of the 1917 Communist Revolution. Socialist realist artworks are characterized by glorified depictions

of political leaders for the sake of communist ideology. With the support of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), socialist realism became an official propaganda art style in the Soviet Union (Vaughan 1973; Bowlt 1976: 265–296). In China, socialist realism was not officially implemented until the PRC period, but it had cultural roots in the Republican period (1912–1949) (see Denton 1996: 257–485).



Figure 1: Wu Guanzhong. *Gaochang Ruins*. 1981. Ink and color on paper, 70 × 68 cm, [https://wuguanzhong.artron.net/works\\_detail\\_brt000007600209?cyear=1981](https://wuguanzhong.artron.net/works_detail_brt000007600209?cyear=1981), accessed on June 7, 2020.

in artists and scholars across multiple generations. While reformists championed abstract painting, regarding it as a universal aesthetic expression in both classic Chinese and modern Western art, conservatives criticized it for its implications of bourgeois formalism and individualism. Some artists, art critics, and journal editors were punished for their defense of abstract painting. Some in the camp of anti-abstract painting suffered as well: the left-wing artist Jiang Feng (1910–1982), then the chair of the China Artists

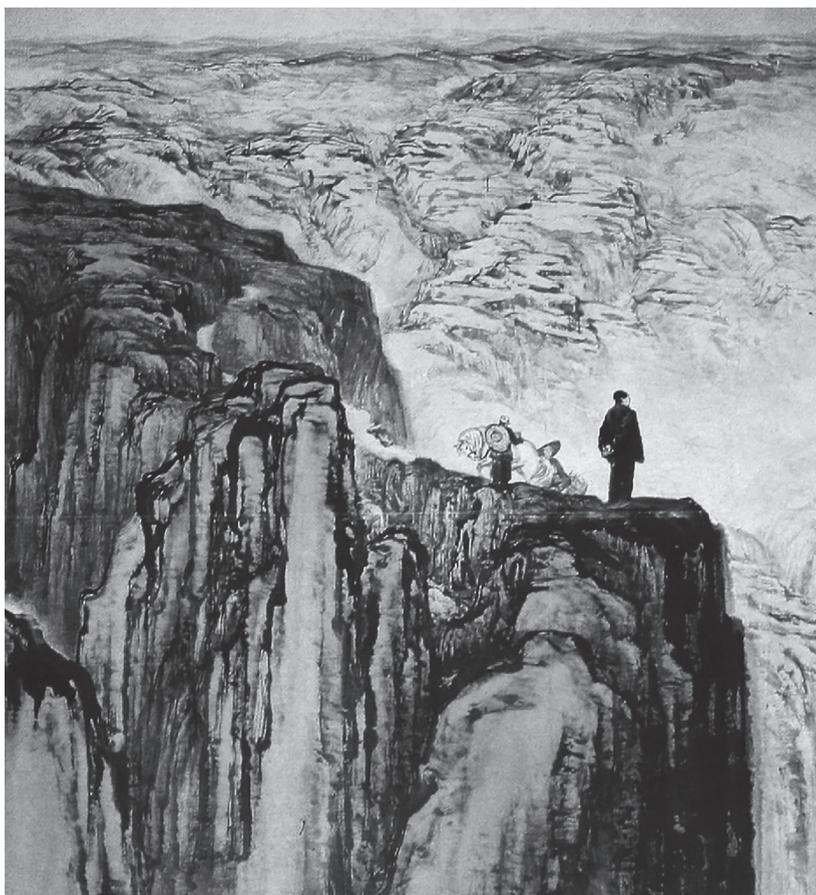


Figure 2: Shi Lu. *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*. 1959. Ink and color on paper, 238 x 216 cm (Andrews and Shen 2012: 175).

Association (*Zhongguo meishujia xiehui*), railed against abstract painting so furiously that he collapsed from a heart attack.

Why did abstract painting, rather than other modern Western art schools, cause such an outcry in 1980s China? How was this type of painting, previously condemned as the corrupt art of the bourgeoisie, legitimized in post-Mao China? What role did abstract painting play in

the aesthetic and cultural transformations during Deng Xiaoping's (1904–1997) reform and opening-up policies? How did the legitimacy of abstract painting contribute to the shift in art standards from the instrumental value of politics to the intrinsic value of artistic forms, thus shaping a new understanding of painting as a self-referential and self-sufficient art?

This paper addresses these questions by exploring the social and cultural forces instrumental in developing abstract painting in Chinese society in the late 1970s and 1980s—a transitional period when China had just begun to reopen to the world, before the global art market had yet exerted its influence on Chinese art. To be more specific, this paper examines the twisting path toward understanding and accepting abstract painting in post-Mao China and puts it in the context of both domestic socio-political change and China's diplomatic relations with the West. Moreover, it points out a misunderstanding of abstract painting caused during cross-cultural communication between China and the West. At the time, to familiarize Chinese audiences with abstract painting, Chinese artists and scholars constructed an aesthetic connection between modern Western abstract painting and premodern Chinese art forms, such as the zoomorphic motifs of bronze and ceramic vessels and the expressive strokes of literati painting. Nevertheless, this transhistorical comparison neglected the significant roles of modern science, industrial advancement, and urban culture in the formation of twentieth-century abstract painting. Thus, it emphasized the non-figurative style, but it failed to explain the modernity of abstract painting in terms of its artistic approaches and its roots in industrial culture.

While this paper explores the efforts of individual artists and scholars in legitimizing abstract painting in China, it calls attention to the significant role of art institutions in promoting abstract painting. In late 1970s and 1980s China, when the art market and mass communication media were not developed, official art museums, art academies, and art journals and magazines were essential channels through which artists and art viewers

learned about abstract painting. The multiple-layered relationships among individual artists, administrators, and institutions—their dialogues, negotiations, and cooperations—reflected the underlying energies in society during the early years of the reform and opening-up era.

### Depoliticizing Artistic Creation

One month after Mao Zedong's death in September 1976, the new chairman, Hua Guofeng (1921–2008), arrested the Gang of Four under the support of Marshal Ye Jianying (1897–1986), putting an end to the Cultural Revolution. The ensuing Movement of Exposition, Criticism, and Uncovering (*Jie pi cha yundong*) took place nationwide to investigate and punish the Gang of Four's followers. In the art world, the criticism of the Gang of Four was explicit in the lengthy titles of articles published in *Meishu*. To name some examples: "Seeing the 'Gang of Four's' Wild Ambition of Seizing the Party's Power through [Their] 'Fights against Shanghai Bourgeois Artworks'" (Huang 1977), "Criticizing Black Painting Is a Fake Phenomenon, Manipulating the Party and Stealing the Country Are the True Aims" (Wenxue yishu yanjiusuo meiyanshi pipanzu 1977), and "Disclosing and Criticizing the Crimes of the Gang of Four's Destruction of Shanghai's Arts and Crafts" (Shanghaishi gongyi meishu gongye gongsi and Shanghaishi gongyi meishu xuexiao 1978).

Despite the widespread criticism of the Gang of Four, Hua Guofeng insisted on the primary value of Maoism in Chinese socialist construction. In the field of art, socialist realism continued to dominate artistic productions and exhibitions. For example, in 1977, the China Artists Association organized the Fine Arts Exhibition in Memory of the Thirty-fifth Anniversary of Comrade Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art (*Jinian Mao Zedong tongzhi "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua" fabiao 35 zhounian meishu zuopin zhanlan*), which displayed more than 700 artworks, to commemorate Mao's art policy of serving workers, peasants, and soldiers.

Between 1977 and 1978, Hua's authority gradually waned as Deng assumed control. While Hua upheld Maoism as the paramount principle of managing the economy and culture, Deng aimed to develop a market-oriented economy and reduce the central government's role in culture. If the public criticism of the Gang of Four in Hua's period allowed artists to breathe a bit of fresh air, then the reform and opening-up policies in Deng's era can be considered to have changed the whole climate of art and culture. In October 1979, at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Literary and Art Workers, Deng criticized the route of art led by the Gang of Four. By referring to Mao's Hundred Flowers policy, Deng encouraged artists to develop a diversity of styles to serve the socialist construction on the one hand while cautioning against extreme individualism on the other (Deng 1979).

From 1979 to the early 1980s, the leading journals of art and literature published hundreds of articles discussing the values of humanism. For instance, in 1979, the political theorist Wang Ruoshui (1926–2002) pointed out the issue of people's alienation from each other and attributed the alienation to ideological controls, and argued for the restoration of humanism in order to advance art and literature (Wang 1986: 186–187). Zhou Yang (1908–1989),<sup>5</sup> then vice director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, declared that humanism and Marxism were not contradictory, and he marked the late 1970s as the age of a third ideological emancipation, following the 1919 May Fourth Movement and the 1941 Yan'an Rectification Campaign (Zhou 1979: 2). In the following year, Ru Xin (1931–), then the director of the philosophy institution affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, claimed that the highest value of human beings should lie in their personal lives instead of the external purposes of politics (Ru 1980).

The reform and opening-up policies and the ensuing wave of humanism produced immediate results in the art world. Jiang Feng publicly urged artists to "bravely pose new questions, discuss new opinions, and break

<sup>5</sup>Zhou Yang was an enthusiastic advocator of Maoism. In Mao's regime, Zhou assumed high positions in the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee and the Ministry of Culture. In July 1960, at the Third National Congress of Chinese Literary and Art Workers, Zhou criticized humanism as a capitalist instrument suppressing class struggles (Andrews 1994: 119–123).

the limits of forbidden zones” (Jiang 1979). Between 1978 and 1979, modernist artists who had been persecuted in the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated, including Wu Guanzhong’s teachers Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) and Wu Dayu (1903–1988).<sup>6</sup> These elderly artists’ so-called “black paintings” (*heihua*),<sup>7</sup> previously displayed in the Black Painting Exhibition in 1974 in Shanghai and condemned as corrupt bourgeois art (Andrews 1994: 374), were now praised for their innovative styles. In 1979, the Shanghai branch of the China Artists Association hosted Lin’s solo exhibition, and the government-sponsored exhibition celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the PRC displayed Wu Dayu’s modernist paintings.

In February 1979—just one month after the formal establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States—Shanghainese artists organized The Twelve Men Painting Exhibition (*Shi’er ren huazhan*) at the Shanghai Children’s Palace in the Huangpu District (*Huangpuqu shaoniangong*), which displayed non-political paintings characterized by impressionism and post-impressionism.<sup>8</sup> Chen Juyuan (1939–), a senior modernist painter who secretly experimented with abstract painting during the Cultural Revolution (Shen and Andrews 2013: 175), showed his apolitical paintings in the exhibition. A decade later, he articulated the significant role of this exhibition in questioning the dogma of propaganda art and guiding artistic creation towards the goal of self-expression (Chen 1989). Despite a lack of public promotion, the exhibition attracted an average of 2,000 visitors per day. The European-style paintings and Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5—the background music for the show’s opening—provided Chinese audiences with an unprecedented experience of art.

Indeed, the promotion of this exhibition in Beijing encountered difficulties. Li Xianting (1949–), then a journalist for *Meishu*, visited the show in Shanghai in February 1979 and recommended it to Liu Xun (1923–2007), who had just been released from prison and who would be appointed as chair of the Beijing branch of the China Artists Association

<sup>6</sup> I use the term “modernist artists” to refer to the twentieth-century Chinese artists who were influenced by modern Western art and who created artworks in those art styles. I describe the modernist artists’ paintings as modernist paintings to make a distinction with “modern” Western paintings (i.e. created from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century).

<sup>7</sup> The term “black painting” was used by the Gang of Four to denounce Chinese modernist paintings. In 1974, Jiang Qing (1914–1991), the leader of the Gang of Four, organized Black Painting Exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai as a means to publicly criticize bourgeois art (Andrews 1994: 368–376).

<sup>8</sup> The twelve artists in the exhibition were: Kong Boji (1932–) and Chen Junde (1937–2019), two faculty members with the Shanghai Theater Academy; Shen Tianwan (1931–), who had studied modernist painting with Liu Haisu (1896–1994) and Guan Liang (1900–1986); Chen Juyuan (1939–) and Guo Runlin (1940–), two members of the Caocaohe (Grass Society) established in 1979 (Shen and Andrews 2013: 50–57); Chen Juhong (1941–), a modernist designer; Luo Buzhen (1943–) and Wang Jian’er (1944–), who taught art at the Shanghai Children’s Palace; Huang Azhong (1952–), who worked in the Shanghai Culture Center; Xu Siji (dates unknown), Qian Peichen (dates unknown), and Han Boyou (dates unknown), who studied modernist painting with Chen Juyuan. For reports of the exhibition in 1979, see Zhu (1979: 13).

<sup>9</sup>When The Twelve Men Painting Exhibition was held in Wuhan, its title was changed to Shanghai Twelve Men Painting Exhibition. The word “Shanghai” was added to clarify that the modernist paintings displayed in the exhibition were created by Shanghainese artists rather than artists in Wuhan. This small addition was meant to avoid potential criticism and censorship from the local government and people.

ten months later. In sympathy with the twelve artists, Liu planned to hold the exhibition in Beijing. However, at the beginning of the reform and opening-up period, censorship remained strict in Beijing, and many officials were not sure about the extent to which they should open the doors to Euro-American art and culture. They were reluctant to take risks to show modernist paintings, which, in their eyes, implied Western liberalism. Consequently, with Liu’s support, the exhibition was moved to Wuhan’s Zhongshan Park in Hubei province.<sup>9</sup>

The publication process of Wu Guanzhong’s article “Formalist Aesthetics in Painting” (1979; Wu Hung 2010: 14–17) also exemplifies the uncertainty lingering in the cultural atmosphere at the time. According to Wu, the article was based on his lectures at Southwest Normal University in Chongqing in 1979, where he criticized political paintings for hindering viewers from appreciating artistic forms. Fascinated by Wu’s ideas, students expected his lectures to be published in the university’s journal. Considering Wu’s high reputation following his solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in the same year of his lectures, such a publication would have been widely popular. However, when Wu submitted his manuscript, the journal editor refused to publish it because of the implications of bourgeois liberalism (Wu 2015: 169–170). Later, Wu Bunai (1929–), an associate editor of *Meishu* and an open-minded writer who introduced Taiwanese and overseas artists to Chinese readers, saw the potential impact of Wu’s article and published it in *Meishu* in May 1979.

Between July 13 and 29, 1979, the Wuming Painting Group in Beijing held an exhibition in a Beihai Park venue administrated by the Beijing branch of the China Artists Association that showed paintings in various styles, such as post-impressionism, fauvism, cubism, and expressionism. In support this exhibition, Liu Xun argued with the Association’s conservative members, who felt the artistic styles of Wuming painters were radically new and ideologically dangerous. The exhibition attracted an average of 2,700 visitors per day. The old master Liu Haisu (1896–1994)

visited the exhibition as well and offered a calligraphic inscription for the show, "Beauty is here" (Shen and Andrews 2013: 38). Besides the innovative paintings, people in the art world were also interested in the Wuming painters' private art experiments during the Cultural Revolution, when they went to the Fragrant Hills, Imperial Palace, the Zoo, Yuyuantan, Zizhuyuan, and the suburbs around Beijing to create non-political, modernist paintings (Wang 2008: 8). Some artists developed nearly abstract styles at the time. For example, *Brightness* (Guangming, fig. 3), by Zhao Wenliang (1937–2019), created one year before the end of the Cultural Revolution, expresses his hope for the future through a white, swirl-like shape on a fully painted plane in bright yellow.

Two months later, the Xingxing Art Exhibition (*Xingxing huazhan*) displayed a total of 163 modernist artworks outside the National Art Museum in Beijing. This unapproved exhibition was shut down by the local

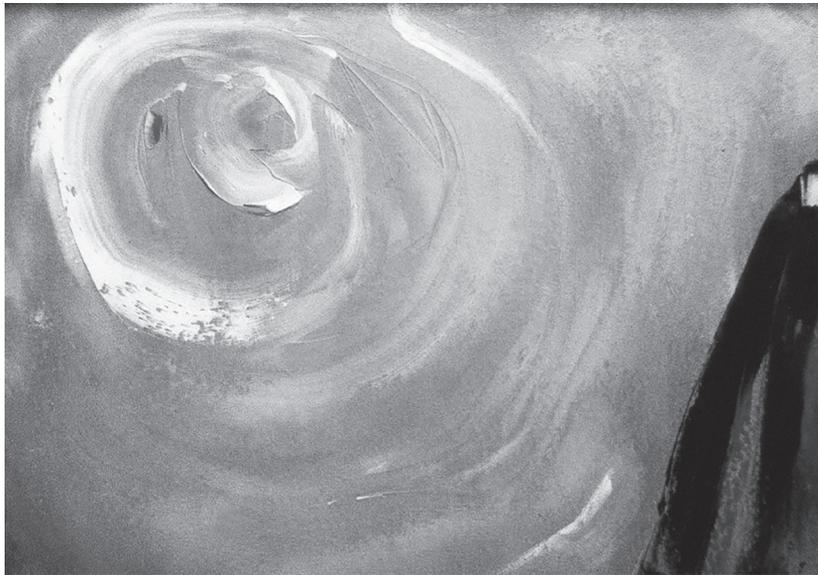


Figure 3: Zhao Wenliang. *Brightness*. 1976. Oil on paperboard, 36 × 26 cm (Wang 2008: 24).

police, but its impact on the public was far-reaching (Gao 2011: 92–97). More than 30,000 visitors went to see it, showing tremendous interest. A selection of comments conveys the appreciation of the Xingxing artists and their works (Li 1980: 10):

“In the front line on the battlefield, I shed my blood; here, I shed my tears,” said a soldier.

“Wang Keping is a brave artist. He uses his chisel to disclose the ugliness of reality,” said a textile mill worker.

“You shout out the voice in people’s hearts, thank you!” said another viewer.

“This exhibition is the result of ideological emancipation,” said a journalist for Meishu.

Remarkably, official art academies played crucial roles in introducing modern and contemporary Western art to young artists. Between 1978 and 1979, the Central Academy of Fine Arts (*Zhongyang meishu xueyuan*) (CAFA) and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (ZAFA) purchased foreign art books from the China Book Import and Export Corporation to advance their libraries’ collections, providing students with high-quality art catalogs, biographies of modern painters, and books on modern art history and theories (Andrews and Shen 2012: 216–217). In March 1979, the American art historian Joan Lebold Cohen (1932–) gave lectures in the CAFA, introducing the artworks created by twentieth-century artists in America, including Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Morris Louis (1912–1962), Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), and Andy Warhol (1928–1987). According to Cohen’s memory, around 900 people crammed into the lecture hall, and they were thrilled by the abstract paintings presented on the screen (Cohen 2009: 3).

Outside the field of oil painting, the trend to abandon political subject matter in favor of purely artistic form was seen in the fields of photography

and literature. Wang Zhiping (1947–), a leading artist of the April Photo Society (*Siyue yinghui*), advocated for the autonomy of artistic form earlier than the publication of Wu Guanzhong’s article “Formalist Aesthetics in Painting.” In April 1979, the Society held its first exhibition, Nature, Society, and Human (*Ziran · shehui · ren*), in Zhongshan Park in Beijing. In the introduction displayed at the exhibition, Wang questioned propaganda photography and claimed that “the beauty of the art of photography resides in the rhythms of nature, in the reality of society, and in the temperaments and interests of people, not in ‘grand themes’ or ‘official consciousness’” (Wang 2010). Many works by members of the April Photo Society feature abstract geometric forms. For example, the photographic work *A Myriad of Twinkling Lights* (Wanjia denghuo) by Liu Shizhao’s (1948–) simplifies lights to superimpositions of circles and dots (fig. 4).

Likewise, young poets wrote *menglong shi* (misty poetry), a new poetic genre characterized by eccentric style, unclear expression, and obscure language. Some scholars contended that misty poetry could not be considered poetry because it did not make sense to the masses and thus could not serve them (Ding 2018). Nevertheless, reformist poets and scholars showed enthusiasm for its free expression, arguing that the beauty of poetry resides in obscurity and spontaneous self-expression. In considering misty poetry as a logical outcome of the Cultural Revolution, the literary critic Xie Mian (1932–) argued that the motivation for creating it derived from the psychological distress caused by the Cultural Revolution, and he urged readers to understand and accept this new type of poetry rather than to denounce it (Xie 2018).

By the end of 1979, reformist painters, photographers, and poets promoted artistic forms as at least as important as political subject matter. Though some conservatives continued to question the validity of pure art, the emerging voices for apolitical, expressive art suggested the new goals of breaking the fetter of the dogmatic rules defined by socialist realism and reorienting artistic creation towards self-expression. These voices



Figure 4: Liu Shizhao. *A Myriad of Twinkling Lights*. 1979. Photography, size unknown (Monohon 2017: 107).

prepared a sound foundation for the public debate over the legitimacy of abstract painting in the following years.

### **Backlash Against Abstract Painting**

The year 1980 marks a turning point as abstract painting became an essential issue of public discussion. Two months after the publication of Wu's article, "On Abstract Beauty," in October 1980, the art historian and theorist Hong Yiran (1913–1990) proposed not overly promoting abstract

painting and cautioned against falling into the trap of bourgeois formalism (Hong 1980). Reaction against abstract painting increased in 1981 when *Meishu* published articles criticizing abstract painting nearly every month. The gist of the criticism was that abstract painting abandons meaningful content in favor of pure forms, and therefore it deviates from the path of communist art and culture. For example, in April 1981, the ZAFAs Art Theory Research Group proclaimed that artworks must embody historical and political content (Zhejiang meishu xueyuan wenyi lilun xuexi xiaozu 1981). One month later, the artist Cheng Zhide (1922–2004) contended that if a work of art merely expressed the beauty of abstract forms at the expense of historical and social meanings, it would not have a future in China (Cheng 1981: 4–9). In June of the same year, Hong Yiran published another article questioning Wu’s idea of abstract beauty and reaffirming that themes and content should be the predominant concerns of artistic creation (Hong 1981).

Probably the most severe criticism came from Jiang Feng. Jiang did not wholly reject modern European painting. As a woodcut artist, Jiang had created works in the style of German expressionism in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>10</sup> In 1979, he visited the unapproved Xingxing Art Exhibition and protected the Xingxing artists when they had conflicts with the police (Andrews and Shen 2012: 209–210). Nevertheless, Jiang could not tolerate abstract painting. At the 1979 conference of the executive directors of the China Artists Association, Jiang opined that abstract painting was not understandable to the masses and could not serve people—arguing so vehemently that he fainted (Jiang 1981*b*: 625). At the 1981 symposium of Young Chinese Oil Painters, Jiang reiterated his claim that abstract painting could not have a future in China because it represented bourgeois formalism and could poison communist culture (Jiang 1981*a*: 440). He continued to criticize abstract painting until his death from a heart attack at a 1982 conference, where he had once again argued with young artists about abstract painting.

<sup>10</sup> Jiang Feng is best known in the Chinese art world for his contributions to the development of socialist art in China. He was a Marxist who believed that art should serve the masses. For Jiang’s earlier engagement in the modernist Woodcut Movement, see Shen (2004: 262–283). For his dedication to socialist art, see Andrews (1994: 42–53).



Figure 5: Qiu Deshu. *Sunshine*. 1979. Ink and paint on paper, 67 × 65 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Asia Art Archive.

The closure of the Grass Society 1980s Painting Exhibition (*Caocao she bashi niandai huazhan*) exemplified the social pressure imposed on abstract painters. Held at the Luwan District Cultural Center in Shanghai, the exhibition included several abstract paintings by Qiu Deshu (1948–), such as *Sunshine* (Yangguang, fig. 5) and *Ideal Landscape—Clear Music* (Lixiang shanshui—qingyun, fig. 6). Though the titles imply the subject of landscapes, the pictorial languages of these paintings feature untrammelled



Figure 6: Qiu Deshu. *Ideal Landscape—Clear Music*. 1980. Ink on paper, 64 × 66 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Asia Art Archive.

brush strokes, curving lines, and dots. Soon after the exhibition opened, the Shanghai Propaganda Department criticized Qiu's abstract paintings as "typical examples of bourgeois liberalism in Luwan District's Cultural System" (Shen and Andrews 2013: 56). As a result, the exhibition was closed, and Qiu underwent criticism and surveillance that year.

The resistance to abstract painting became increasingly severe as the Party launched the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement between 1982 and

1983. In response to increasing speculation, bribery, corruption, and other adverse effects of the market economy, at the Twelfth Congress of the Party held in September 1982 Deng Xiaoping called for people to uphold socialist culture and to prevent liberalist ideas from destroying socialist values. Consequently, political censorship became extremely strict in the field of art. In 1982, it became illegal to establish private art societies. The art societies that had been established between 1979 and 1980 were disbanded during the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement. The Xingxing artists, like Wang Keping (1949–), Huang Rui (1952–), and Ma Desheng (1952–), who had been invited to join the Beijing branch of the China Artists Association in 1980, were now expelled from the Association.

The 1983 Experimental Painting Exhibition (*Basan nian jieduan huihua shiyanzhan*) illustrates the risks of creating and displaying abstract works. Held at the Faculty Club of Fudan University in Shanghai, the exhibition showcased modernist works, including abstract paintings by Zhang Jianjun (1955–). Compared with Qiu Deshu's works from the late 1970s, Zhang's works in the early 1980s were more experimental in terms of art media and approaches. For example, in *Eternal Dialogue #2* (Yongheng de duihua #2, fig. 7), the artist used oil paints, clay, stones, and sand to create a purely abstract form with a coarse and solid texture. In *Contraction and Expansion* (Ju · san, fig. 8), the expressive brush strokes and the seemingly casual graffiti on canvas indicated the artist's body gestures of hurling and smearing during the creation process. Due to these radical art forms, the Shanghai Propaganda Department and Cultural Affairs Bureau asked Zhang to write a self-criticism letter. After refusing to do so, Zhang lost his job as a research assistant at the Shanghai Art Museum.

Likewise, art critics and administrators were punished for writing and publishing articles promoting abstract painting. Shao Dazhen (1934–), then the editor in chief of *Meishu*, was an open-minded art historian who supported publishing articles on modern art. However, under the pressure of censorship, he had to fire Li Xianting and other young editors who actively

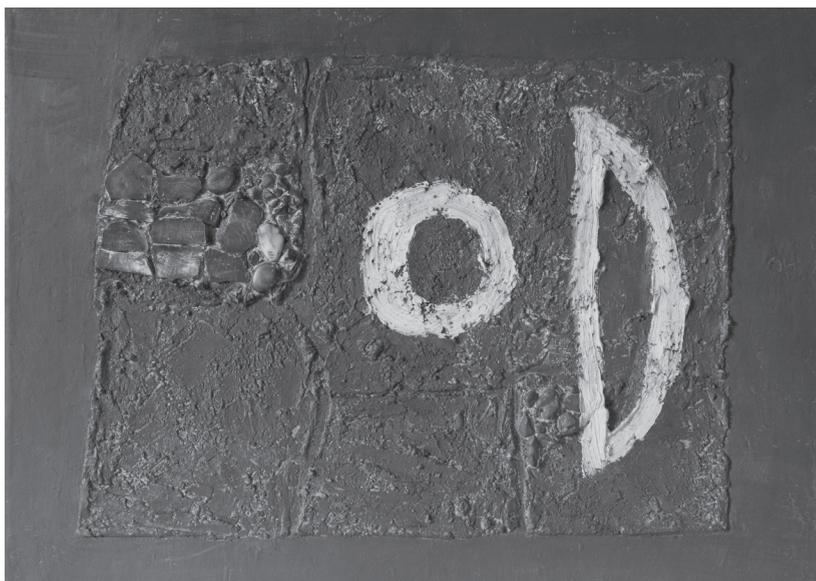


Figure 7: Zhang Jianjun. *Eternal Dialogue # 2*. 1982. Oil paint, stone, sand on linen, 74 x 99.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

introduced modern Euro-American art to Chinese readers. Punishing or firing editors was a kind of backhanded response meeting the demands of censorship. To ensure the running of the journals and magazines, editors struggled to hold to their principles as much as possible while making the necessary compromises when negotiating with bureaucratic power.

Shen Kuiyi (1954–), then the director of the Art Book Department at the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, worked on the book series "Twentieth-Century Theories of Western Fine Arts", aiming to translate and publish modern Western art theories about abstract painting, such as the works by Wassily Kandinsky, Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965), Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), and E. H. Gombrich (1909–2001). The first book to be translated was Wassily Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*. In his preface to it, Shen pointed out the necessity of learning theories of abstract painting, as he realized that Chinese artists at the

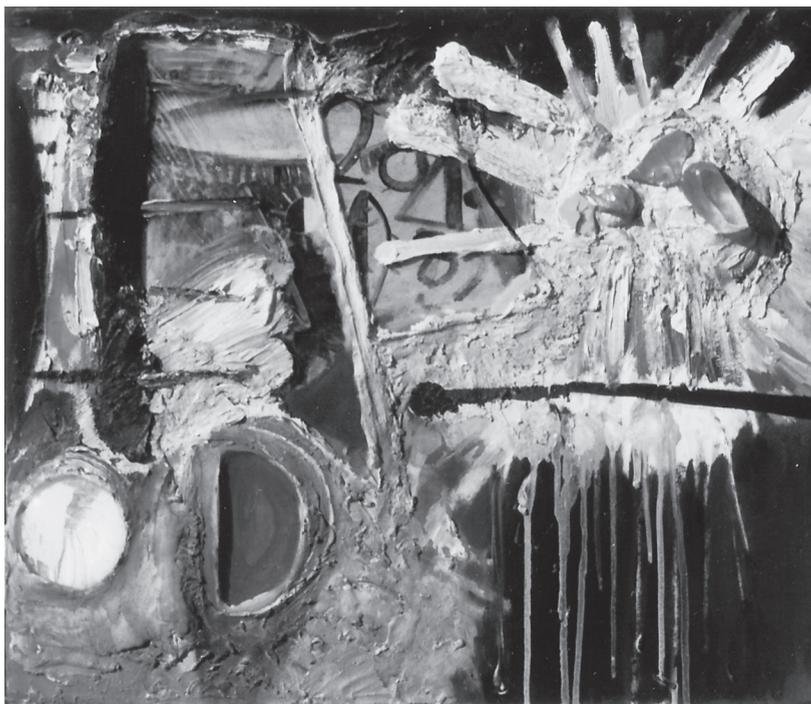


Figure 8: Zhang Jianjun. *Contraction and Expansion*. 1983. Oil paint, glass, magnifying glass on plywood, size unknown. Courtesy of the artist.

time imitated abstract painting styles but remained unfamiliar with fundamental theories of modern Western art. When Shen launched this project, the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign was unfolding in 1986. Shen's preface was seen as promoting Western bourgeois art ideas, so he was asked to write a self-criticism letter. Because he refused to do so, the preface was deleted and never published (Li 2019).

Compared with impressionism, post-impressionism, cubism, fauvism, and other modern art schools, non-figurative abstract painting was particularly vulnerable to political censorship. Its obscure style made it incomprehensible to Chinese audiences. Several elderly artists had been

interested in post-impressionism, fauvism, and cubism in the Republican period (1912–1949). However, abstract painting was rarely mentioned at that time. Even the French-educated and Japanese-educated artists with direct access to the new trends in the European art world paid very little attention to abstract painting. Therefore, in the late 1970s and 1980s, when various schools of modern European art were reintroduced to China, it was natural that these artists accepted post-impressionism, fauvism, cubism, and others familiar to them more easily than abstract painting.

Young artists, born from the 1940s to the 1960s, knew modern art less than their predecessors because access to Western art was blocked during Mao's regime and because their art education was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. When art academies began to recruit students in 1978, they prioritized students from the class backgrounds of workers, peasants, and soldiers. Primary faculty members of the major art institutions then, such as Zhan Jianjun (1931–), Jin Shangyi (1934–), and their colleagues, had studied socialist realistic painting with the Soviet Union's painter Konstantin Maksimov (1913–1994) in the CAFA between 1954 and 1957. The art academies' pedagogy and courses were modeled after the Soviet Union's socialist art. To young artists who were trained in socialist realism, abstract painting was visually and conceptually incomprehensible. Therefore, by the early 1980s, very few artists were familiar with abstract painting.

### **Making Sense of Meaningless**

The legitimization of abstract painting in post-Mao China required both ideological emancipation and aesthetic reconstruction. Ideological emancipation was fairly well supported as Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policies accelerated Chinese engagement with global culture. Reformist artists and scholars managed to publish a series of articles in *Meishu* to respond to the criticism of abstract painting. In demonstrating how people's adherence to socialist realism led to widespread prejudice

against abstract painting, the writer Mao Shi'an (1948–) cited the definition of modernism in the authoritative dictionary *Cihai*, which considered it to be a negative style that “destroys the solid forms of literature and art” and “overthrows the basic rules of artistic creation” (Mao 1982: 41–42). The art critic Li Xianting questioned the doctrine of socialist realism and promoted abstraction, absurdism, and stream of consciousness as significant approaches to express people’s inner feelings (Li 1981: 46–47; Li 1982: 44–46).

While ideological emancipation continued, its corollary of aesthetic reconstruction was a more complicated task. Even if abstract painting were separated from bourgeois liberalism, it was still at the margins of acceptability. Compared with expressionism, cubism, fauvism, and surrealism, which abandon realistic representation yet retain recognizable forms, abstract painting is more radical because it completely cancels references to nature and objects, only leaving obscure forms for viewers to decipher. Chinese audiences, who were accustomed to seeing pictures that expressed or at least implied some meanings, struggled to make sense of art that appeared meaningless to them.

To address this dilemma, reformist artists and theorists associated abstract painting with classic Chinese art. For instance, Wu Guanzhong argued that Kandinsky’s abstract paintings share a non-imitative style with the cursive calligraphy of the Tang dynasty artist Zhang Xu (685–759) and the ink paintings of the Qing dynasty artist Shitao (1642–1707) (Wu 1980: 38–39). The artist Mao Shibo (1928–2001) traced abstract art forms to a more extended history of indigenous art, including geometric decorations on ceramic and bronze vessels of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–ca. 1046 BCE) and the Eight Trigrams of the *Book of Changes* in the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–256 BCE) (Mao 1983: 16–18).

Among various traditional art forms in Chinese history, literati ink painting was most used to explain abstract painting, based on their shared expression of untrammelled strokes and non-realistic forms. For

instance, Liu Gangji (1933–2019) situated traditional literati painting in a middle zone between abstract painting and realistic painting (Liu 1980). In the same vein, the art theorist Yang Aiqi (1942–) argued that literati landscape painting developed from naturalistic representation to abstract styles (Yang 1983: 19–22). The ink painter Xu Shucheng (1932–) even used the term *banchouxiang* (semi-abstract) to describe the stylistic features of literati paintings in his two essays on the concept of abstract beauty (Xu 1983; Xu 1984).

Establishing the aesthetic affinity between modern Western abstract painting and traditional Chinese artworks supposedly helped Chinese audiences understand abstract painting. Meanwhile, it caused some misunderstandings. For example, when linking abstract painting with the geometric patterns on ceramic and bronze vessels, Chinese artists and theorists equated modern abstract painting—a twentieth-century style resulting from industrialization and urbanization—with the abstract elements adopted in the zoomorphic motifs from the Neolithic agricultural era. Likewise, when they characterized Chinese literati painting as “abstract” or “semi-abstract,” they confused purely abstract and non-realistic styles. Though both styles abandon verisimilitude in favor of subjective expression, they have different artistic approaches and cultural motivations. Chinese artists and critics failed to explain the modernity of abstract painting in relation to industrial aesthetics, urban visual culture, color theories, non-Euclidean geometry, optical science, psychoanalysis, and such new techniques as X-ray imaging, chrono-photography, and cinematography, all of which were crucial to the formation of modern abstract painting in the West. Thus, the comparison between modern abstract painting and traditional Chinese art forms was based on artistic styles. It overlooked the modern sociocultural context in which abstract painting is rooted.

In addition to individual artists, critics, and theorists, art museums played a significant role in introducing abstract artworks to Chinese

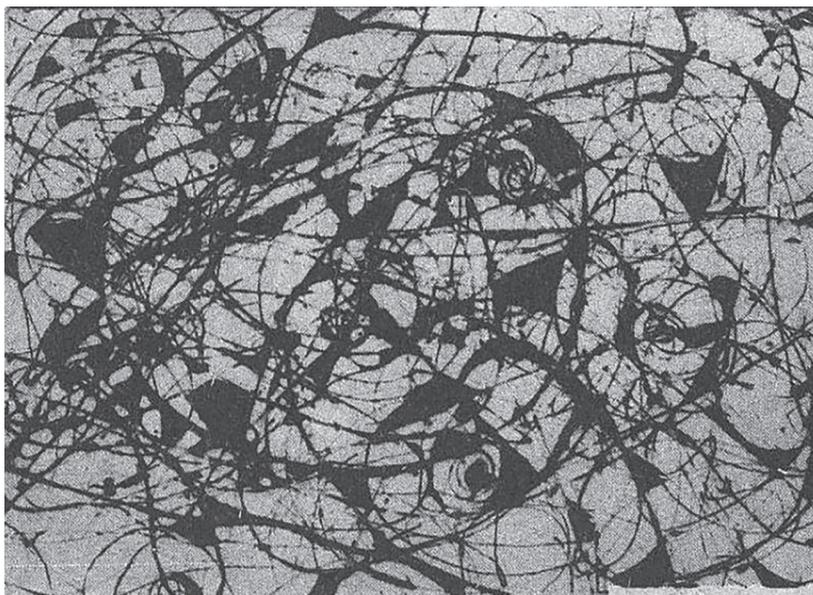


Figure 9: Xiao Dayuan. *Fish and Net*. 1980. Watercolor on paper, size unknown (Gao 1980: 35).

audiences. Between August 20 and September 4, 1980, the National Art Museum held the Xingxing Art Exhibition, now approved but which had been banned in September 1979. This time, art viewers could see abstract paintings, like Xiao Dayuan's (dates unknown) *Fish and Net* (Yu yu wang, fig. 9), which was reproduced in *Meishu* as a highlight of the exhibition (Gao 1980: 35). Xiao produced a purely abstract composition by simplifying a naturalistic representation of fish and net, reducing them to curving lines and dark planes. Though bearing some visual similarities with Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, Xiao's work resulted from his conscious observation of nature instead of the unconsciousness and automatic drawing that played roles in Pollock's art.

From September 10 to 24 of the same year, the National Art Museum displayed 191 works created by the French abstract painter Jean Hélion (1904–1987). It was considered the first French art exhibition to be held



Figure 10: Prints of Jean Hélion's paintings (*Meishu* 1980, no. 11: 42).

<sup>11</sup> The reception of Pablo Picasso's art in China can be traced back to the pre-PRC period. On February 10, 1945, the communist newspaper *Liberation Daily* published an article titled "Celebrating the Painter Picasso for Joining the Communist Party" (Qingzhu huajia Picasuo jiaru gongchandang 庆祝画家皮加索加入共产党), introducing Picasso's art and his devotion to the cause of communism. In 1956, the Delegations of Chinese Artists visited Picasso in France. In the new century, there have been three solo exhibitions of Picasso's works in China. The first was held at the Shanghai World Expo in 2011, showcasing sixty-two of Picasso's works; the second was hosted at the National Art Museum of China in 2014, displaying 100 prints; and the last was held at the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in 2019, showing 103 artworks.

in China since Deng Xiaoping visited France in 1975. *Meishu* reproduced eight of Hélión's works (fig. 10) and explained how the painter developed works from a realistic style to a purely abstract one (Shan Dao 1980: 42). In May 1983, the Museum hosted a solo Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) exhibition featuring twenty-eight works, which was attended by French President François Mitterrand (1916–1996) to celebrate the Sino-French relationship.<sup>11</sup> Three months later, the Museum displayed abstract paintings by the Chinese-French artist Zao Wou-Ki (1921–2013). Shao Dazhen published an article praising Zao for his innovative integration of modern European art and indigenous Chinese aesthetics (Shao 1983: 19).

As the Sino-US relations developed, the Museum hosted the exhibition American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in Beijing and Shanghai between September 1 and November 19, 1981, displaying seventy American paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts' collection, including twelve abstract expressionist paintings by Jackson Pollock (fig. 11), Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) (fig. 12), Franze Kline (1910–1962), Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011), and others (Dantai 1981: 39–50). Even for artists who had seen printed reproductions of abstract expressionist paintings, the brilliant colors and expressive brush strokes of the original works were shocking. The Wuming painter Zhang Wei (1952–), who painted *Experiment 3* (Shiyan 3, fig. 13) one year before the exhibition, vividly remembered the shock of visiting the exhibition (Palmer 2012).

Official art journals and magazines published abstract paintings by both Chinese and foreign artists. In 1981, *Meishu congkan* (Art anthology) published Wu Dayu's *Torrents* (Pangtuo, fig. 14) and nine works by Zao Wou-Ki (Zao 1981). In the following years, *Meishu* published Wu Guanzhong's abstract-style landscape paintings (Wu 1983) and a set of abstract paintings by Kandinsky, Frank Kupka (1871–1957), Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), Robert Delaunay (1885–1941), and Auguste Herbin (1882–1960) (Yao 1982: 61–62). In 1983, the art historian Zheng Shengtian (1938–) returned to China after



Figure 11: Jackson Pollock. *Number 10*. 1949. Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 271.8 cm (*Catalogue of American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, 1980: 157).



Figure 12: Hans Hofmann. *Twilight*. 1957. Oil on plywood, 121.9 x 91.4 cm (*Catalogue of American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, 1980: 161).

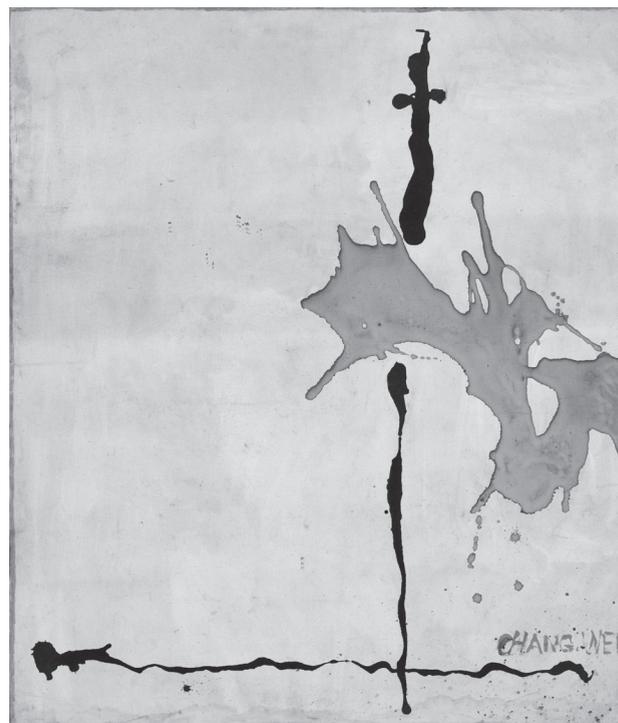


Figure 13: Zhang Wei. *Experiment 3*. 1980. Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 83.5 cm. Liu Gang's Collection. Courtesy of Liu Gang.



Figure 14: Wu Dayu. *Torrents*. 1981. Oil on canvas, 52 x 37 cm (Wu 1981: 62).

two years of studies abroad, during which he visited different museums in the United States, Mexico, Canada, and thirteen countries in Europe.<sup>12</sup> After his return, Zheng was invited to give lectures in art institutions nationwide. At the CAFA and the ZAHA, Zheng gave lectures that introduced the history of twentieth-century Western abstract painting and postmodern art trends, including minimalism, pop art, performance, installation, and urban sculpture. The presence of abstract painting in official art museums and art academies anticipated the boom of abstract painting in the second half of the 1980s.

### Legitimizing Abstract Painting

As the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement came to a halt in 1984, political censorship loosened the constraints on artistic activities. The 1985 Modern Painting: Six Men Group Exhibition (*Xiandai huihua: liu ren lianzhan*), held at the Students Club of Fudan University in Shanghai, displayed various kinds of abstract paintings by Yu Youhan (1943–) and students at the Shanghai Art and Craft Fine Arts Academy, such as Qin Yifeng (1961–), Ding Yi (1962–), and Feng Lianghong (1962–), who were inspired by Yu's abstract art. The exhibition included several works by Yu, demonstrating his experiments with abstract art before his well-known *Circle* (Yuan) series from the mid-1980s to the present. For example, the thin and soft brushwork in his *Abstraction 1984–12* (Chouxiang 1984–12, fig. 15) differs from the short and thick linear patterns in the *Circle* series.

In April 1985, the Huangshan Conference on Oil Painting was held at the Jingchuan Hotel in Anhui, marking the official recognition of abstract painting. More than 100 influential artists and scholars nationwide attended, and they came up with forward-looking proposals for the future of oil painting. For instance, Wu Guanzhong proposed developing individualized styles of Chinese painting. Zheng Shengtian introduced Western museums and galleries, with the aim of broadening people's views of art. After six days of discussion, artists and scholars reached a

<sup>12</sup> In the early 1980s, Zheng Shengtian was among the first group of artists and scholars who studied abroad with government grants. He subsequently produced a series of reports on Euro-American art (Zheng 1985a, 1985b, 2009).

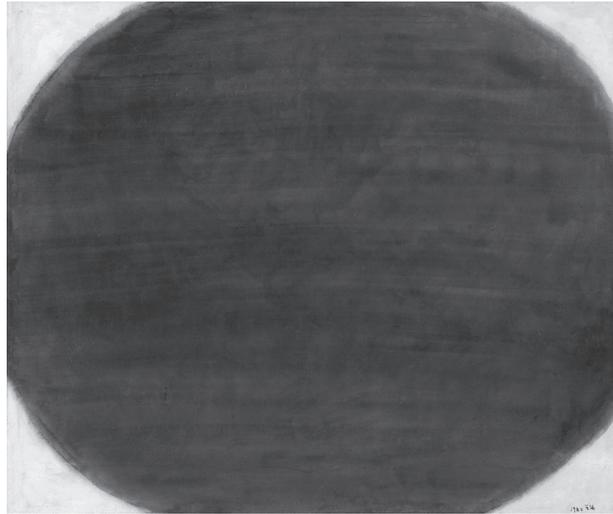
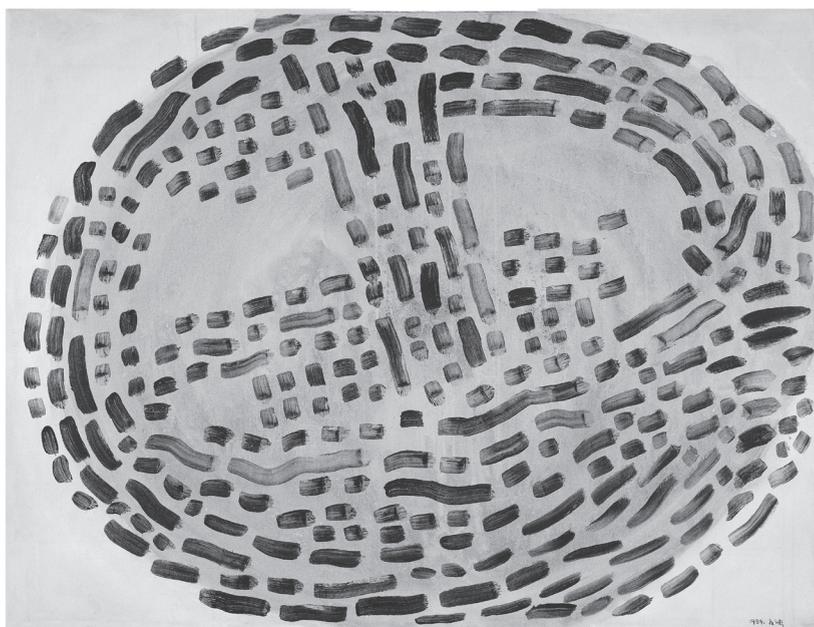


Figure 15: Yu Youhan. *Abstraction 1984–12*. 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 90 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

consensus that abstract painting could and should be developed in China (Tao and Zhai 1985: 1355).

In May 1985, the ZAFAs invited Zao Wou-Ki to give one month of lectures on oil painting. Zao's ideas profoundly impacted students' artistic pursuits, such as when he encouraged them to develop personal styles rather than limiting their explorations to the conceptual division of Eastern art and Western art (Sun 2000: 19, 23). Twenty-seven artists selected from the eight leading art academies in China attended Zao's lectures. Afterward, they returned to their academies and shared their learnings with local students. Between 1985 and 1986, the ZAFAs invited the Bulgarian artist Marin Varbanov (1932–1989) to give lectures. When he taught in ZAFAs, Varbanov established the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov, where Wang Gongyi (1946–), Xu Lei (1963–), and other art students in ZAFAs freely experimented with abstract forms and various materials.

In this period, abstract painters developed syncretic styles by integrating classic Chinese philosophies and art forms with modern and



1985-2 114x 87 cm 丙烯画布

Figure 16: Yu Youhan. *Abstraction 1984–1985*. 1984–1985. Acrylic on canvas, 114 × 87 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

postmodern Western art. For instance, Yu Youhan created the *Circle* series by combining Daoist cosmology, Paul Cézanne's (1839–1906) artistic approach of geometric simplification, and the artistic style of American Color Field Painting. His *Abstraction 1984–1985* (Chouxiang 1984–1985, fig. 16) reduces the depiction of pedestrian flows and traffic streams to circular compositions characterized by linear ink strokes, expressing the artist's contemplation on the Daoist ideas of universal movement and order (Yu 2016: 261; Li 2021: 114–118). Zhou Changjiang's (1950–) *Complementation* series adopts abstract forms to convey the dualist philosophy of yin and yang. In *Complementation No. 120* (Hubu 120 hao, fig. 17), Zhou created different shapes with the same color tones. As a

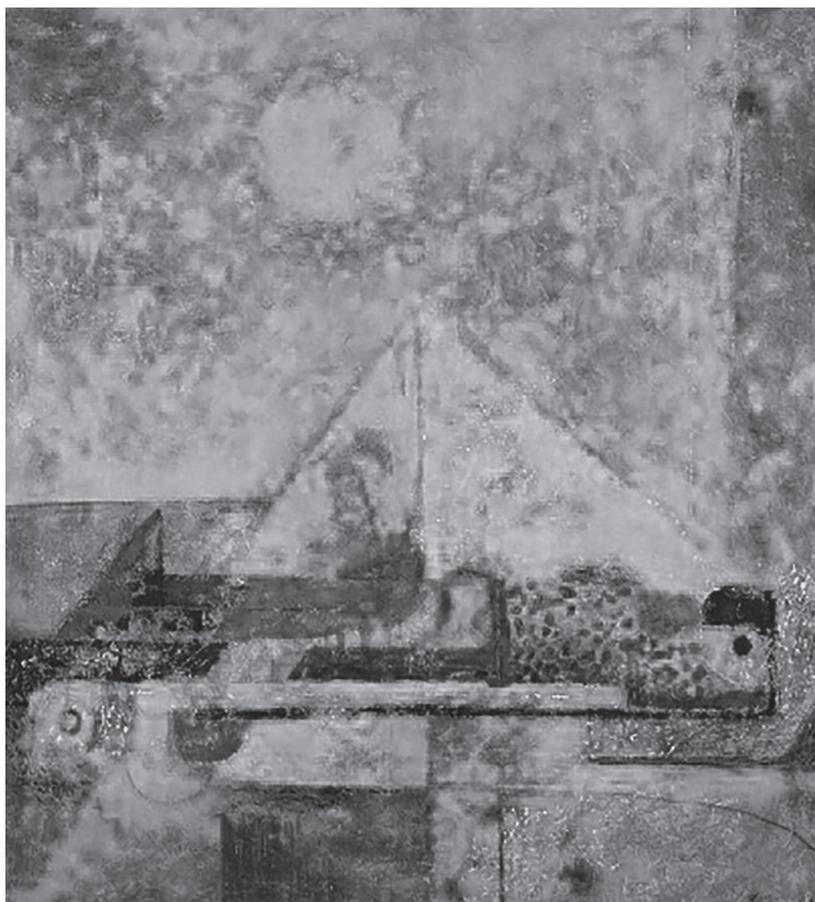


Figure 17: Zhou Changjiang. *Complementation No. 120*. 1989. Oil on canvas, 160 x 168 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

result, the contrast between a circle's smooth outline and a triangle's sharp angles dissolves in one unity of a red plane without sacrificing their intrinsic qualities. Driven by the philosophical idea of the oneness of nature and human beings, Zhang Jianjun took a bold step in applying non-traditional art materials—stones, branches, sunsets, rain, water, fire, and air—and installation and performance art to his multiple series, such



Figure 18: Zhang Jianjun. *Water · Fire*. 1992. Chinese ink, water, fire on watercolor paper, 192 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

as *Eternal Dialogue*, *Noumenon (Existence)* (Cunzai), and *Water · Fire* (Shui · huo) (Li 2021: 118–125). In *Water · Fire* (fig. 18), for example, Zhang created circular forms by using water, fire, and ink, during which the artist must adjust his subjectivity to the changing forces of water and fire.

These artists' syncretic approaches, to a large extent, resulted from the phenomenon of *wenhua re* (culture fever) at the time (Zhang 1994). A wide variety of traditional philosophies and art forms that had been denounced as corrupt relics during the Cultural Revolution were reevaluated and became available to the public in the 1980s. Books on foreign

<sup>13</sup> Some philosophical works that were translated into Chinese and had a great impact on Chinese readers included *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (Freud 1984), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1986), *La Nausea*, *Le Mur*, *Erostrate* (Sartre 1986), *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1987), *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (Sartre 1988), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1987), and *Twilight of Idols* (Nietzsche 1987).

art—ranging from classical Greek and Roman to Renaissance art, from neoclassical to modern and postmodern art—reached Chinese audiences in one great flood. Artists were eager to expand their knowledge, and so read books on Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, traditional calligraphy and ink painting theories, and a wide range of European art. In particular, many European philosophy books were translated into Chinese, including works by Kant (1724–1804), Hegel (1770–1831), Nietzsche (1844–1900), Freud (1856–1939), Sartre (1905–1980), and many others.<sup>13</sup> The artist Zhong Ming (1949–) painted *He Is Himself—Sartre* (Ta shi ta ziji—Sate) and published the article “Starting from Painting Sartre—On Self-Expression in Painting,” which stressed the significance of self-expression in artistic creation (Zhong 1981: 7–9; see also Wu 2014: 56–57). Artists were obsessed with new ideas, such as self-consciousness, subconsciousness, pure reason, egoism, existentialism, and the freedom of spirit, even though they might not carefully examine them. Li Zehou (1930–) insightfully observed people’s fascination with the idea of individual freedom:

What the wave of Sartre suggested was not people’s understanding of his ideas but some information he set out ... after having experienced a decade of suffering, people would think highly of their individual choice and decision. (Li 2000: 67–68)

As Chinese urban culture developed, abstract painting became popular in films. For example, one scene of the black comedy film *The Black Cannon Incident* (Heipao shijian, 1985) shows a group of dancers performing against a background picture (fig. 19) with black and white rectangles reminiscent of Frank Stella’s (1936–) *Gray Scrambled Double Square*. The science-fiction film *Dislocation* (Cuo wei, 1986) presents the actor Zhao Shuxin’s modern life in a geometric world. Viewers can see a painting of a white square in Zhao’s apartment, squares of red, orange, and yellow on the wall of his office (fig. 20), and abstract sculptures in the studio he frequently visited. Abstract artworks appear in another science-fiction film, *The Synthetic Man* (Hecheng ren, 1988). In one scene, an abstract painting



Figure 19: A group of female dancers and one male singer perform in front of a geometric abstract picture in the film *The Black Cannon Incident* directed by Huang Jianxin (1985).



Figure 20: The interior design of the actor Zhao Shuxin's office in the film *Dislocation* directed by Huang Jianxin (1986).



Figure 21: An abstract painting in the film *The Synthetic Man* directed by Yin Aiqun and Wang Yabiao (1988).

is positioned center screen, occupying a larger space than the actress sitting under it and the actor standing on its right (fig. 21). The curving bands and bright golden color in the painting successfully express a new urban taste, which corresponds to the actress holding a cigarette and the actor wearing business attire.

Between February 5 and 19 in 1989, the National Art Museum hosted the China-Avant Garde Exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*), which featured paintings in various styles, including abstract paintings. Though the exhibition was paused for a short time due to the artist Xiao Lu's (1962–) gunshots at her installation *Dialogue* (*Duihua*)—a highlight of the exhibition for some (Gao 2011: 158)—the significant role of abstract painting in the show should not be underestimated. More than fifty abstract paintings were displayed, accounting for more than one-fifth of a total of 250



Figure 22: A photo of a viewer and abstract paintings at the China Avant-Garde Exhibition (1989), photographed on February 17, 1989. Courtesy of Fei Dawei and the Asia Art Archive.

works. In the exhibition hall, audiences were surrounded by five abstract paintings, three on the front wall and two on the sides (fig. 22). They often paid careful attention to the paintings, trying to understand the obscure forms (fig. 23). In other words, the viewers were no longer just receivers of pictorial information. This new relationship between artworks and viewers can be observed in the preface to the exhibition catalogue by the art historian Gao Minglu (1949–):

We have already seen a natural presentation of [what] 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.... It has completed a process of spiritual sublimation and cultural immersion through the mutual contemplation and common creation among artists, their works, and the spectators. [It] says good-bye to the idea that art is meant to please the human senses alone or instruct people with dogmas. (Gao 1989)



Figure 23: A photo of three viewers and abstract paintings at the China Avant-Garde Exhibition (1989), photographed on February 17, 1989. Courtesy of Fei Dawei and the Asia Art Archive.

Many abstract paintings demonstrated the artists' experimental spirit in absorbing and combining art forms from multiple cultures. Remarkably, Wang Gongyi's *Chinese Calligraphy* (Zhongguo shufa, fig. 24) juxtaposes large ink planes and small patches of lines and dots, showing a creative integration of traditional Chinese art, collage, and geometric abstract styles. Wang Chuan's (1953–) *Wind from Southern China* (Nan Zhongguo feng, fig. 25) adopts the traditional hanging scroll and ink. Meanwhile, the spontaneous strokes reveal the artist's free gestures dripping, smearing, and scribbling ink on paper. In displaying a variety of abstract paintings, this first large-scale avant-garde art exhibition signified the rise of abstract painting in an official art space.

Three months after the exhibition, Zhou Changjiang's *Complementation No. 120* won the silver award at the Seventh National Fine Arts Exhibition (*Diqi jie quanguo meizhan*)—the first time a purely abstract painting gained an official award. By the late 1980s, abstract painting

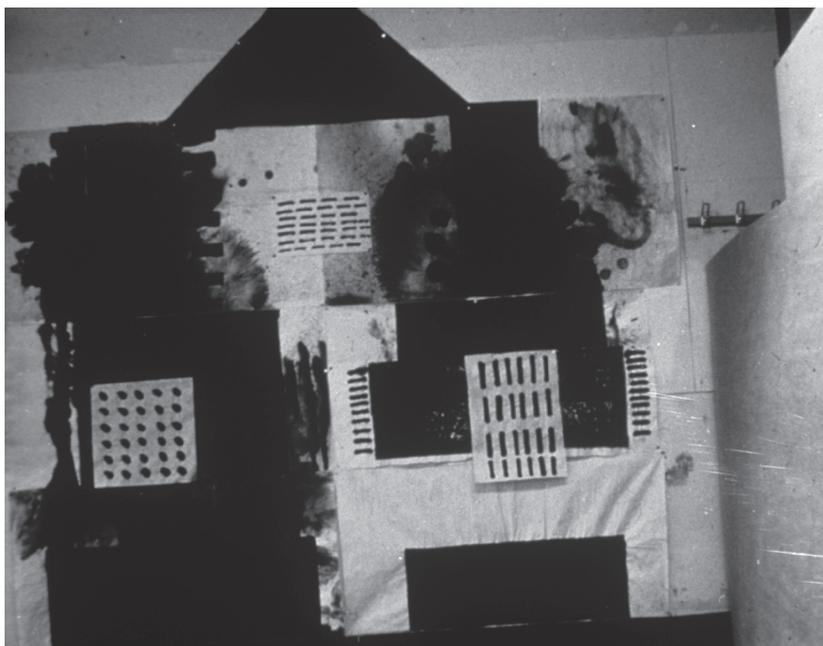


Figure 24: A photo of Wang Gongyi's *Chinese Calligraphy* at the China Avant-Garde Exhibition (1989). Courtesy of Joan Lebold Cohen and the Asia Art Archive.

was no longer considered the corrupt art of bourgeois liberalism. After a decade of efforts, it was eventually legitimized in Chinese society. Different styles of abstract works appeared not only in fine arts venues but also in films, theatres, business halls, and other spaces of mass culture, engaging in the reconstruction of urban visual culture. They changed the meaning of art from a political instrument to a self-referential, independent form of artistic expression.

### Conclusion

Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policies relinked China to world culture. However, the legitimization of abstract painting was not without obstacles. Because during Mao's regime abstract painting had been

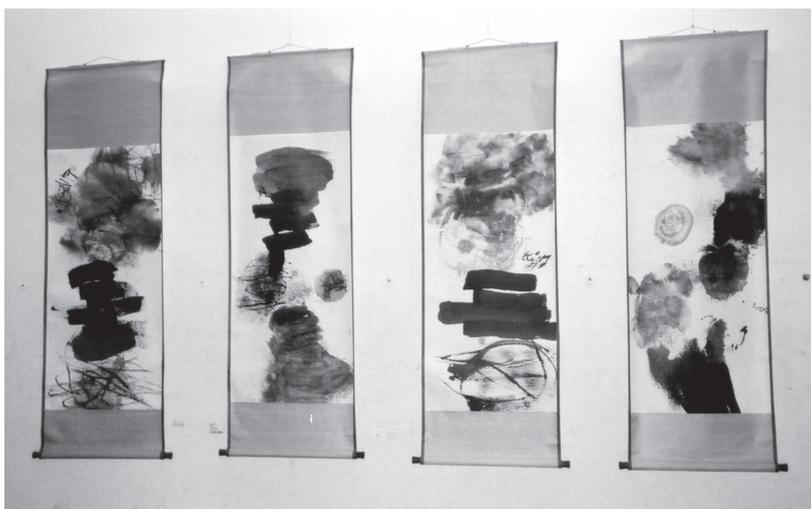


Figure 25: A photo of Wang Chuan's ink paintings *Wind from Southern China* at the China Avant-Garde Exhibition (1989), photographed on February 17, 1989. Courtesy of Wang Chuan and the Asia Art Archive.

condemned for its supposed bourgeois liberalism and individualism, it inevitably became a target of criticism in the post-Mao period. Compared with modern art schools that stepped away from the figurative tradition yet maintained some representational forms, abstract painting was more radical in completely effacing recognizable shapes and declaring an absolute autonomy of artistic forms. To Chinese audiences, who were used to seeing socialist realistic paintings and propaganda posters, abstract works were meaningless and incomprehensible. Especially when the market economy caused social problems, abstract painting was banned in public exhibitions and became a target of public criticism.

Still, reformist artists and scholars did not give in to the unfavorable cultural climate. They were highly aware of the necessity of freeing art from the dogma of socialist realism. By emphasizing the aesthetic affinity between abstract painting and indigenous art forms, they familiarized

Chinese audiences with the obscure forms of abstract painting. By the 1980s, abstract painters could feel free to express their feelings and thoughts without being burdened with conveying political messages. In return, art audiences were no longer passive recipients of propaganda art. Instead, they became active explorers of new art experiences. Finally, art institutions played crucial roles in supporting and promoting abstract painting. Before the global art market entered China, official art magazines, art academies, and museums provided the precious resources from which artists and audiences learned about abstract painting. The network of Chinese abstract painting was not formed outside art institutions; instead, it unfolded within them and expanded outward. Despite some conflicts between individual artists and institutions in some circumstances, their dialogues, negotiations, and collaborations for promoting abstract painting mirrored and mediated the cultural transformation of the early reform and opening-up period. Together, they set an opening and experimental tone for contemporary Chinese art.

### Glossary

<i>Banchouxiang</i>	半抽象
<i>Basan nian jieduan huihua shiyanzhan</i>	八三年阶段绘画实验展
Beihai	北海
<i>Caocao she bashi niandai huazhan</i>	草草社八十年代画展
Caocao she	草草社
Chen Juhong	陈巨洪
Chen Junde	陈钧德
Chen Juyuan	陈巨源
Cheng Zhide	程至的
<i>Chouxiang</i>	抽象
<i>Chouxiangmei</i>	抽象美
<i>Cihai</i>	辞海
<i>Cunzai</i>	存在
<i>Cuo wei</i>	错位
Deng Xiaoping	邓小平
Ding Yi	丁乙
<i>Diqi jie quanguo meizhan</i>	第七届全国美展

<i>Duihua</i>	对话
Fei Dawei	费大为
Feng Lianghong	冯良鸿
Fudan	复旦
<i>Gaochang yizhi</i>	高昌遗址
Guan Liang	关良
<i>Guangming</i>	光明
Guo Runlin	郭润林
Han Boyou	韩柏友
<i>Hecheng ren</i>	合成人
heihua	黑画
<i>Heipao shijian</i>	黑炮事件
Hua Guofeng	华国锋
Huang Azhong	黄阿忠
Huang Rui	黄锐
Huangpuqu shaoniangong	黄浦区少年宫
<i>Hubu 120 hao</i>	互补 120号
Jiang Feng	江丰
Jiang Qing	江青
Jie pi cha yundong	揭批查运动
Jin Shangyi	靳尚谊
Jingchuan	泾川
<i>Jinian Mao Zedong tongzhi "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua" fabiao 35 zhounian meishu zuopin zhanlan</i>	纪念毛泽东同志 “在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话” 发表35周年美术作品展览
<i>Ju · san</i>	聚·散
Kong Boji	孔德基
Li Xianting	栗宪庭
Lin Fengmian	林风眠
Liu Gang	刘钢
Liu Haisu	刘海粟
Liu Shizhao	刘世昭
Liu Xun	刘迅
<i>Lixiang shanshui—qingyun</i>	理想山水—清韵
Luo Buzhen	罗步臻
Luwan	卢湾
Ma Desheng	马德升
Mao Shi'an	毛时安
Mao Shibo	毛士博
Mao Zedong	毛泽东
<i>Meishu congkan</i>	美术丛刊

<i>Meishu</i>	美术
menglong shi	朦胧诗
<i>Nan Zhongguo feng</i>	南中国风
<i>Pangtuo</i>	滂沱
Qian Peichen	钱培琛
Qin Yifeng	秦一峰
Qiu Deshu	仇德树
Ru Xin	汝信
Shanghaishi gongyi meishu gongye gongsi	上海市工艺美术工业公司
Shanghaishi gongyi meishu xuexiao	上海市工艺美术学校
Shao Dazhen	邵大箴
Shen Kuiyi	沈揆一
Shen Tianwan	沈天万
Shi Lu	石鲁
<i>Shi'er ren huazhan</i>	十二人画展
Shitao	石涛
<i>Shiyan 3</i>	实验3
<i>Shui · huo</i>	水 · 火
Siyue yinghui	四月影会
<i>Ta shi ta ziji — Sate</i>	他是他自己—萨特
Wang Chuan	王川
Wang Gongyi	王公懿
Wang Jian'er	王健尔
Wang Keping	王克平
Wang Zhiping	王志平
<i>Wanjia denghuo</i>	万家灯火
Wenhua re	文化热
Wenxue yishu yanjiusuo meiyanshi pipanzu	文学艺术研究所美研室批判组
Wu Bunai	吴步乃
Wu Dayu	吴大羽
Wu Guanzhong	吴冠中
Wuming	无名
<i>Xiandai huihua: liu ren lianzhan</i>	现代绘画: 六人联展
Xiao Dayuan	萧大元
Xiao Lu	肖鲁
<i>Xingxing huazhan</i>	星星画展
Xu Lei	徐累
Xu Siji	徐思基
<i>Yangguang</i>	阳光
Ye Jianying	叶剑英

<i>Yishu congkan</i>	艺术丛刊
<i>Yongheng de duihua #2</i>	永恒的对话 #2
Yu Youhan	余友涵
<i>Yu yu wang</i>	鱼与网
<i>Yuan</i>	圆
Yuyuantan	玉渊潭
Zao Wou-Ki	赵无极
Zhan Jianjun	詹建俊
Zhang Jianjun	张健君
Zhang Wei	张伟
Zhao Shuxin	赵书信
Zhao Wenliang	赵文量
Zhejiang meishu xueyuan wenyi lilun xuexi xiaozu	浙江美术学院文艺理论学习小组
Zheng Shengtian	郑胜天
Zhong Ming	钟鸣
<i>Zhongguo shufa</i>	中国书法
<i>Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan</i>	中国现代艺术展
Zhongguo meishujia xiehui	中国美术家协会
Zhongshan	中山
Zhongyang meishu xueyuan	中央美术学院
Zhou Changjiang	周长江
Zhou Enlai	周恩来
Zhou Yang	周扬
<i>Zhuanzhan shanbei</i>	转战陕北
Ziran · shehui · ren	自然 · 社会 · 人
Zizhuyuan	紫竹院

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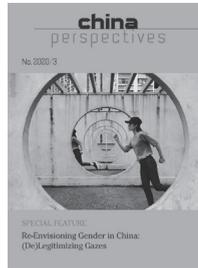
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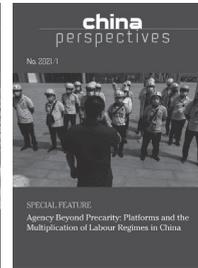
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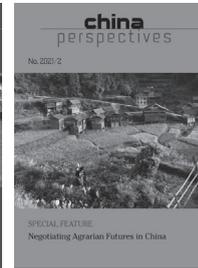
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