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Modernism in China: Too Early and Too Late¹

In his essay “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson charts a sequence of movements in Western culture from realism through modernism into postmodernism. He argues that this sequence parallels capitalism’s successive development from market capitalism, through monopoly capitalism and imperialism, into multinational or consumer capitalism.² Jameson ultimately endorses this progress in Western culture, politics and economy. Could we also find such a sequence in China? Is this sequence really “progress” or is it simply a linear course of events? When we look back on the processes in Chinese culture over the past century, the kind of sequence described above is nowhere to be found. Or, if it can be found, it has already been rewritten, altered, or distorted. In fact, we will discover that, while modernism exists throughout the transformations of twentieth-century Chinese culture, it never arrives on time. Borrowing Lyotard’s phrasing, we could say that it always comes either too late or too soon. Modernism, instead of the postmodern in China, “would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).”³ Modernism seems to be a specter haunting China. In this essay, I wish to narrate some historical moments of modernism in China and try to grasp this modernist phantom. This phantom is to be found in the arts (though not exclusively). In particular, this essay will focus on visual art.

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¹ Thanks to Aleš Erjavec for comments and suggestions, and to Brandon Underwood for polishing the English.

² Jameson admits, “At any rate, it will also have been clear that my own cultural periodization of the stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism is both inspired and confirmed by Mandel’s tripartite scheme.” *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991, 36.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 81.

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1. The Entry of Modernism into China

Modernism as a style or ideology in the arts arrived in China in the 1920s. It emerges simultaneously, or even prior to, realism. This contravenes Jameson's schema. Realism overtakes modernism in the subsequent course of events, and thereby both proves and disproves Jameson's theory.

Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), the founder of Chinese modernist painting, went in 1919 to France to study painting. In the same year, the painter Xu Beihong (1895-1953) made the same journey. In 1920s Parisian modern art was on the rise, while realism had not yet stepped down from the stage of history. For these young men from China, realism was equally new as modern art and modernism. However, the two Chinese newcomers took different artistic paths. Xu studied realist painting, while Lin preferred modernist ones. Lin Fengmian returned to China in 1925 and established an art school in Beijing. By 1928 he had been appointed President of the National Academy of Art in Hangzhou.

Well-known modernist painters such as Wu Guangzhong (1919-2010), Zhu Dequn (1920-2014), and Zhao Wuji (1921-2013) trained at Lin's academy. Modernism in visual arts was the main style and artistic orientation from the mid-1920s to the middle of 1930s. In fact, before Lin brought modernism to China, there were already preludes. For example, Liu Haisu (1896-1994) had visited Japan in 1919, subsequently introducing modernist painters such as Paul Cézanne into China. According to Sullivan's record, from 1920s to 1930s there were several centers of modern art in China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Wuxi, Quanzhou, Chengdu, and so on.⁴ "In 1920 Cheng Jin, a traditional painter who had learned about Western art in Tokyo, gave a series of lectures at the academy of fine art on impressionism, postimpressionism, cubism, fauvism, and futurism."⁵

Xu Beihong returned to China in 1927. His realistic style attracted wide attention. Actually Christian missionaries, such as Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), had brought realist representational painting to China two centuries before, but it was not widely accepted for a number of reasons. One was that the paintings

⁴ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 42-51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

created by Western missionaries were stored, and thus isolated, in the court, unavailable to the public. Their recognition, appreciation and influence were limited. The Chinese public was not yet sufficiently familiar with Western culture nor was it ready to accept realistic painting. The other reason was that European style of realist painting wasn't suitable for the Chinese *literati's* taste. Let us illustrate this position by a comment on Western painting by Zou Yigui (1686-1772):

Westerners are skilled in geometry. They make precise measurements of light and shade, foreground and background [...] The images in the pictures are measured with a set square so that they are reduced in size according to distance. People almost want to walk into the houses and walls they have painted. [...] Though meticulously executed, their works are those of craftsmen and cannot be considered as paintings.⁶

Geometric laws whereby objects appear to diminish in size as they recede from the viewers did not cause much excitement among Chinese painters as had been the case in Renaissance Italy. Chinese viewers were not amazed when they saw paintings with this unique capacity for creating illusion as had happened in Florence two centuries before. As to Masaccio's wall-painting *The Holy Trinity, the Virgin, St John and Donors*, Ernst Gombrich made the following remark:

We can imagine how amazed the Florentines must have been when this wall-painting was unveiled and seemed to have made a hole in the wall through which they could look into a new burial chapel in Brunelleschi's modern style. But perhaps they were even more amazed at the simplicity and grandeur of the figures which were framed by this new architecture.⁷

Prejudice against foreign culture, arrogance and the sense of superiority of domestic culture prevented the prevalence of realist painting in China. But after the Opium War in 1840, China suffered further aggression from colonial powers, and its cultural arrogance and sense of superiority quickly diminished. The

⁶ Zou Yigui, *Small Mountain Painting Copybook (Xiaoshan Huapu)*, in *The Collected Aesthetics Materials in All Previous Dynasties (Lidai Meixue Wenku)*, ed. Ye Lang, Vol. 15, Beijing: Gaodeng Jiaoyu Press, 2002, 340.

⁷ E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, fifteenth edition, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990, 172-73.

country eventually opened its doors to accept foreign culture. When this happened, realist paintings caused excitement and amazement both among artists and public, as did the illusionary paintings in Renaissance Italy. For example, when Wu Fading showed his *Heroes of Qinglongqiao*, a large oil painting depicting an incident from revolutionary historical events in 1922, “its size and dramatic realism caused something of a stir.”⁸

In China, Xu Beihong’s realist paintings are more celebrated than Lin Fengmian’s modernist works, not only because the former can produce magic-like illusions, but also because they can be easily understood by the general public that regards them with the naïve eyes of a child. Realist paintings that cannot satisfy connoisseur’s taste can amuse the naïve child. As Su Dongpo (1037-1101) pointed out in his poem: “To discuss paintings in terms of verisimilitude is to show the child’s understanding. To indite poem just limited in this poem is to show that the poet is not a real poet.”⁹ Child and the general public do not have good taste in the arts. They appreciate painting in terms of its subject, poem in terms of its literal meaning. The real artist is good at metaphorical meaning and the real connoisseur pursues meaning beyond images and words.¹⁰

So on the one hand, this capacity to understand realist paintings could not serve the *literati*’s refined taste. On the other, it could function politically, including the power to encourage the Chinese people to join the Anti-Japan War and later the War of Liberation. In 1937, with the breakout of the Lugouqiao Incident, China first entered the eight-year Anti-Japan War and then a three-year War of Liberation. Chinese modernist painters could not create masterpieces focused on the wars and major historical events such as Picasso’s *Guernica* and therefore faded out from the public view. Realist paintings such as Xu Beihong’s *Tianheng and Five Hundred Gentlemen* (oil on canvas, 197x349cm, 1930), *Foolish Old Man Moved Mountain* (ink on paper, 143x424cm) and Jiang Zhaohe’s (1904-1986) *The Refugees* (ink on paper, 200 x2700cm, 1943) encouraged Chinese soldiers and the masses to enthusiastically join the forces of resistance against Japan. This political relevance of realist paintings greatly added to their reputation. This

⁸ Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 42.

⁹ Ye Lang, *op. cit.*, Vol. 8, 320.

¹⁰ The sentences in Chinese are: 论画以形似，见与儿童临。赋诗必此诗，定知非诗人。The sentences are translated word by word. Maybe the second sentence can be translated as “To write poem just in terms of literal meaning is to show that the poet is not a real poet.”

reminds us of Walter Benjamin's explanation of distraction and concentration as two ways of relating to art. Benjamin argued:

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the works of art.¹¹

In Benjamin's text, the contrast between distraction and concentration does not mean the contrast between modernist painting and realist painting but rather the contrast between painting and film or architecture. However, in terms of realist paintings that were taken as propaganda tools during the wars in China, they played the same role as photography and film in Benjamin's text. Art's function was now reversed. Benjamin argued, "Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics."¹² Realist painting can serve political purposes even if it is not a reproduced work of art. In addition to reproduction, realist paintings share some properties with photography. Both are representations of reality and easily understood by the masses.¹³ This explains why Castiglione's painting could not be accepted in eighteenth century China but Xu's could be in the twentieth. In short, Castiglione's realist paintings were not accepted by *literati* because of aesthetic appreciation, while Xu's realist paintings were accepted by the masses for political purposes. By the same token, this explains why Xu's realistic painting outdid Lin's modernist painting during the wars. Facing long and brutal wars, Lin's modernism, which was devoted to aestheticism, paled into insignificance.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968, 239.

¹² *Ibid.*, 224.

¹³ Realism has different meanings. In its specific sense, realism was an artistic movement that began in the middle of the nineteenth century in France. In general, realism is defined as the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully. (See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_\(arts\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_(arts))). Jameson uses realism in a specific sense. Here I extend realism to include its general sense. In China, realism is normally used in its general sense. Only in academic realm of art history are the differences between romanticism and realism emphasized. Erasing the differences between its specific sense and its general sense would not hinder the comparison of Chinese art with Jameson's sequence, since realism in its specific sense and general sense can be seen as premodern artistic style. What we need are the differences between realism and modernism, instead of the differences between different realisms.

Modernism was obviously born at a wrong time in China. According to Jameson's cultural periodization, in the 1920s China did not possess the social conditions necessary for modernism to flourish. The feudal Chinese empire was overthrown in 1911 and capitalism remained weak in the first half of the twentieth century. Monopoly capitalism, which is the social requirement for modernism, had yet to emerge. The first time modernism came to China too early.

The premature birth of modernism in China could be attributed to the influence of modernism from the West and to affinity between traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern Western aesthetics. All members of the first generation of Chinese modernism were educated either in Europe or Japan. They imported Modernism from the West, because it had not grown naturally in China. Modernism could have been accepted at the same time as realism, or even earlier, due to the affinity between traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern Western aesthetics. The former developed independently of its Western counterpart for centuries. The disinterested attitude towards the aesthetic object, the idea of art for art's sake, aesthetic experience as pleasure caused by free play—features that constitute the core of modern Western aesthetics—can be found in Chinese philosophy from more than two millennia ago.¹⁴ It seems very natural for Chinese *literati* to accept and adapt modern aesthetics and modernism. This explains why modernism came to China earlier than realism. However, the wars and the process of modernization unique to China ended the modernist honeymoon with traditional Chinese aesthetics. The direction of modernization in art and aesthetics was heteronomous instead of being autonomous, which was the direction taken by modern Western aesthetics.

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Both traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern Western aesthetics were criticized and completely abandoned especially after the revolution in 1949. Art for the people, instead of art for art's sake, became the core of Chinese Marxist aesthetics. In 1936 Benjamin warned: "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art."¹⁵ This Communist response could be found ten years later in China.

¹⁴ For details, see Peng Feng, *The Modern Chinese Aesthetics*: Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Press, 2014.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 242.

2. Marxism

Between 1949 and 1976, art in China was dominated by socialist realism. Modernism was totally suppressed. About the art of this period, Sullivan made the following observation:

The years during which Mao Zedong exerted total control over cultural life in China were, for creative men and women, at first a period of commitment and hope, then of uncertainty as the reins were alternately tightened and loosened, and finally of growing despair and frustration, culminating in the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution. Artists were required to “serve the people.” The dialectical struggle between tradition and revolution, Chinese and Western art, continued, with Western modernism replaced by Soviet socialist realism. The theoretical debate was carried on over the artists’ heads by Party ideologues, who enforced Mao’s directives to “make the past serve the present” and “make foreign things serve China.” Within strict ideological limits, many new answers to that challenge were found. If for the professional artist Party control was often stifling, and at times severe punishment was meted out to deviants, the encouragement given to workers and peasants to take up the brush would enormously broaden the human base from which creative art could spring.¹⁶

Mao’s authority ended after he died in 1976. On July 14, 1979, an underground art group named The No Name, realized its first exhibition in Huafangzai Museum in Beijing. Most of the exhibited works were modernist paintings. The No Name Group was founded in early 1960s and brought together a dozen amateur painters. They believed in the modernist credo “art for art’s sake.” Not all members of the group received their education abroad. Their modernist aesthetics thus did not originate in Europe as was the case with the first generation of Chinese modernists. On the contrary, they developed their modernism on the basis of traditional Chinese aesthetics. When Liu Haisu, one of the founders of the first generation of Chinese modernism, visited the 1979 exhibition he gave it an extremely high appraisal. The amateur artists were very excited. It seemed to them as if they passed the tests and received a diploma from art academies in Europe.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 128.

¹⁷ For details, see Gao Minglu, *The No Name: A History of A Self-Exiled Avant-Garde*, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007.

Modernism that obviously differs from socialist realism is taken by art historians as the beginning of contemporary art in China. Art for art's sake had its political implications when it was advocated by modernists in late 1970s. Modernism became a tool against socialist realism and, furthermore, against the whole socialist ideology. Modernism discarded pure aestheticism and autonomy and returned to heteronomy, but in a diametrical relation to socialist realism. For the dominant ideology, the latter were sycophants, and the former, dissidents. Dissident or critical modernism was later proclaimed to be contemporary art.

Yuan Yunsheng's mural *Water-Sprinkling Festival: A Paeon of Life* in the building of the Beijing Capital International Airport is a good example of the frequently present mix of modernist and contemporary art. Three painted nude women in the painting caused an uproar in Beijing and also elsewhere in the country. Thousands of citizens visited the new airport just to take a look at the painted nude women. The painting's style is not socialist realism but modernism. But the painter's intention is not only artistic but also political: Yuan not only wanted to defend modernism but also to test the degree of openness of the authorities and the general tolerance of society. Surprisingly, Deng Xiaoping praised this work, while the public could not accept it. Finally the commissioner Li Ruihuan decided to build a wall in front of the nude women so that the public could not see this part of the work. Forced by public opinion the artist went into exile in the United States. Yuan Yunsheng's mural *Water-Sprinkling Festival* is not only modernist but also contemporary due to its political intentions and implications, even if its style is typical modernism.¹⁸

Exhibitions of another major group, the Stars, can be viewed in the same way. Its members were painters and sculptors who were fascinated by modernism. However, they had no occasion to show their works openly during the dominance of socialist realism. Finally, they decided to exhibit their works in the courtyard of China National Museum of Fine Art during the 5th National Fine Art Exhibition in September 1979. The illegal exhibition was closed immediately after its opening and the exhibiting artists immediately started to demonstrate. This unexpected exhibition became a serious social and political event. The authorities were finally forced to make concessions. The exhibition was permitted

¹⁸ Zheng Qi, "Intending to Test the Reformation with Naked Women: An Interview with Yuan Yuansheng," *The Beijing News*, September 11, 2013.

to take place in Shishahai Museum in November of the same year and again in China National Museum of Fine Art in August 1980.

Yuan Yunsheng's *Water-Sprinkling Festival* and most of the other works of the Stars exhibitions are modernist paintings and sculptures. Opposing socialist realism with the aid of modernism was a common strategy for Chinese artists in 1980s. According to socialist realism, art should come from the people and should reveal their everyday life. The best way for art to achieve such an aim is to imitate and transfigure people's life. In a word, art should be a tool for educating the people and to strengthen socialist ideology, and so art cannot be independent, pure, or autonomous.

In 1980s, Chinese avant-garde artists launched a movement whose agenda was to purify artistic language. This Purification Movement aimed at saving art from utilitarian uses and at substituting a heteronomous art for an autonomous one. By this time in the West postmodern art had surpassed modernism and autonomous art, or "art for art's sake," was considered an outdated idea. Nevertheless, in China, where in the 1980s art was dominated by socialist realism, an idea of avant-garde art based on "art for art's sake" still carried subversive connotations.

Xu Bing created his *Book from the Sky* between 1987 and 1991. He is a representative of the Purification Movement. *Book from the Sky* is different from, and goes beyond, the abstract painting that was practiced by many members of the Purification Movement. *Book from the Sky* is totally meaningless. It is not a painting, not even an abstract one. It is actually a book, an unreadable book that consists of thousands of characters created by Xu Bing. The artist spent four years to create a meaningless thing with the intention to defend the idea that art is meaningless and to fight against socialist realist art.

The Purification Movement cannot be interpreted only as a modernist movement, i.e. a movement of "art for art's sake" or formalism, since it has obvious political implications. Xu Bing admits that there are political elements in his works, even if his original intention was not political. As he replies to Glenn Harper: "As an artist, I don't usually think about political factors when I create a work; I am focused on more concrete issues—the methodology I plan to use, which techniques will work best, etc. But at the same time I believe that since Chinese society is such a politically charged environment, and since I grew up

in that environment, it is unavoidable that political elements will emerge in my work.”¹⁹ In short, by attacking socialist realism, the Purification Movement aimed at subverting the whole socialist ideology. But the political implication of *Book from the Sky* is so hidden or obscure that few among the public can interpret it. Instead, most viewers see in it cultural implications. The book, even unreadable, is easily seen as a symbol of Chinese nature.

In the 1990s Chinese artists and critics finally comprehended the differences between modernism and contemporary art. Political Pop and Cynical Realism could directly express their political demands without the shelter of modernism. Modernism was criticized by the new interpreters of art as conservative and outdated. Modernism again failed to take on artistic significance in China, but this time it had come too late. China caught up the postmodern trend very quickly. “It’s Modern but is it contemporary?” is the question Hal Foster put to the new MoMA in 2004.²⁰ Chinese artists faced the same question when they devoted themselves to modernism but suddenly found themselves in the shift from modernism to contemporary art.

The observation that modernism came to China in 1920s contradicts Jameson’s sequence of cultural movements from realism through modernism into post-modernism, while its early death in 1930s and rebirth in 1980s confirms Jameson’s theory. Modernism should emerge after the maturity of realism. However, realism reached its over-mature or moribund stage in Chinese socialist realism. In 1980s it was too late to resuscitate it. But the story of modernism in China does not end here. We are witnessing its new life in the new millennium.

3. Chinese Contemporary Art

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In Chinese art circles postmodernism was not broadly recognized, because it was quickly absorbed by modernism and contemporary art.

What is Chinese contemporary art? This was the theme of the First China Contemporary Art Forum co-organized by James Elkins and myself in Beijing in 2009. No

¹⁹ Glenn Harper, “Exterior Form-Interior Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing,” *Sculpture* 22.1 (2003), 51.

²⁰ Hal Foster, “It’s Modern but is it contemporary?” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26, No. 24 (December 2004), 23-25.

tangible conclusions came from the three days of presentations and discussions, except a 1000-page bilingual proceedings published two years later. Although Chinese contemporary art appears to be difficult to define, this does not signify that the notion is useless or meaningless. We can differentiate Chinese contemporary art theoretically and practically not only from Chinese traditional and modern art, but also from contemporary art in North America, Europe and across the globe. Historically, art after the late 1970s could be called contemporary art. Theoretically, art related to contemporary society, especially art expressing dissent and criticism of the dominant ideology, is commonly called contemporary.

Of course, this is only one meaning of the ambiguous notion of contemporary art. There are others.²¹ One influential definition was authored by Arthur Danto and Hans Belting, who claimed that contemporary art is post-historical art. The word “post-historical” literally means after or devoid of history. Danto wrote, “Today there is no longer any pale of history. Everything is permitted.”²² Hans Belting noted that “Contemporary art indeed manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward.”²³ Danto and Belting are influential authors in North America and Western Europe. If they are right, it means that contemporary art in North America and Western Europe does not possess a “history” (understood teleologically and prescriptively, as progress, world view, necessity, or period-style. Since for many, North America and Western Europe represent the international and the postmodern traditions, we can perhaps say that international contemporary art or postmodernist art is an art without history.

International contemporary art does not possess history not only because in this history there is no progress, but also due to its vague and undefined beginning. A clear break between modern and contemporary art is difficult to establish. As Danto wrote:

It is characteristic of contemporaneity—but not of modernity—that it should have begun insidiously, without slogan or logo, without anyone being greatly aware

²¹ For different interpretations of contemporary art, see Hal Foster, “Contemporary Extracts,” <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-extracts/>

²² Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 12.

²³ Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art*, trans. Christopher S. Wood, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 3.

that it had happened [...]. Contemporary art [...] has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is at all different as art from modern art generally.²⁴

In China and Eastern Europe, i.e. in the postsocialist countries, the situation is different.²⁵ The beginning of contemporary art in postsocialist countries is clear. There is much public discussion about it, and almost everyone in art circles and even in society as a whole is aware of its beginning. In contemporary art there are revolutions or reforms. The enemy of contemporary art in these countries is obvious and indubitable, i.e. socialism and socialist realism. In short, contemporary art in postsocialist countries is different from contemporary art in postmodernist countries.

Contemporary art in Eastern Europe has its beginnings, but not the progress that is essential for history. The radical political and artistic revolutions in Eastern Europe very quickly changed the society. Contemporary art soon became the hegemonic art form and was quickly absorbed into the international contemporary art community and soon reached its post-historical stage.

The situation in China is different not only from postmodernist countries but also from postsocialist ones. Instead of radical revolution, China carried out gradual reformation. Here contemporary art has not yet won the fight with socialist realism. Contemporary art in China is still undergoing “progress” and has not yet reached the post-historical stage. Danto preferred to call contemporary art post-historical art. The post-historical means a period without narrative direction. Danto wrote:

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We could capitalize the word “contemporary art” to cover whatever the disjunction of postmodernisms was intend to cover, but there again we would be left with the sense that we have no identifiable style, that there is nothing that does not fit. But that in fact *is* the mark of the visual arts since the end of modernism, that as a period it is defined by the lack of a stylistic unity, or at least the kind of stylistic unity which can be elevated into a criterion and used as a basis for developing a

²⁴ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, 5.

²⁵ For contemporary art in post-socialist countries, see Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.

recognitional capacity, and there is in consequence no possibility of a narrative direction. That is why I prefer to call it post-historical art. Anything ever done could be done today and be an example of post-historical art.²⁶

But Chinese contemporary art still has its narrational direction and has not yet reached its post-historical stage or end. In the past forty years, there were movements and successive stages. Based on these movements or stages, a history of Chinese contemporary art is still possible. Actually several books on the history of Chinese contemporary art were published recently.²⁷ From critical realism and critical modernism in 1980s, through political pop and cynical realism in the 1990s, to pop surrealism and new ink art in 2000s, the story of Chinese contemporary art is being told.

The master narrative of history can differ according to different perspectives. Such history could be divided into three stages. After aping Western art in the 1980s and serving Western art markets in 1990s, Chinese contemporary art finally reached its self-consciousness of identity in the new millennium. The identity consists of its Chinese features, contemporaneity and artistic-ness. In the past decades Chinese contemporary art borrowed much from the rich tradition of Chinese culture. But since 2008, demand for art with Chinese characteristics started to become a prominent phenomenon in art circles. Numerous avant-garde artists, such as Feng Mengbo in Beijing and Qiu Zhijie in Hangzhou, abandoned new media experiments and turned back to traditional ink painting. This does not mean that they turned into old masters of ink painting. Instead, the pursuit of contemporaneity transformed old ink painting into new ink art. Akin to modernists in early twentieth century, such as T. S. Eliot, the newness of their art could be somehow traditional. Rather than challenging the boundary of art, Chinese contemporary artists are defending the status of art or artisticity. Most of contemporary artists in China had academic education. They do not believe slogans, such as “Everyone is an artist” declared by Joseph Beuys, or “Everything is permitted [to be art],” announced by Arthur Danto.

Demanding Chinese characteristics, pursuing contemporaneity and defending artistic-ness has thus resulted in yet another art movement in China, namely,

²⁶ Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, 12.

²⁷ Lu Hong, *Chinese Contemporary Art 1978-2008*, Changsha: Hunan Meishu Press, 2013; Lv Peng, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006.

the New Ink Art Movement. Their works were exhibited in dozens of exhibitions, such as *Undoing Shuimo: Invitational Exhibition of International Contemporary Ink Art* at Shanghai Duolun Modern Art Museum in October 2012 and Beijing MoCA in January 2013, *Re-Ink: Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary Ink and Wash Painting 2000-2012* at Hubei Fine Art Museum in December 2012 and Today Art Museum in April 2014, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in December 2013, and so on. Indubitably the wave of new ink art is becoming increasingly stronger.

This fresh movement of new ink art is different from the movement of experimental ink art which began in 1980s and ended in 1990s. Ironically, the latter is even newer than the former. Experimental ink art was so fascinated by the pursuit of novelty that it hardly maintained its Chinese character or its artisticity and reached its end quickly. The difference between experimental ink art in the 1990s and new ink art in the 2010s is somewhat similar to the difference between graffiti and street art.

Even if the two are in many ways the same, contemporary street art is clearly more subtle and aesthetic than graffiti. Street art aims at “aesthetic integration” instead of occupation. “Viewing street art is about more than the aesthetic appreciation a new art form.”²⁸ New ink art participates in this return of the aesthetic and can be regarded as a return from the contemporary or postmodern to the modern. Modernism seems to emerge in China for its third time after the end of contemporary art.

4. Conclusion

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Let us return to the beginning. The emergence of realism, modernism and postmodernism or contemporary art in China does not fall into the sequence charted by Fredric Jameson. Actually Jameson’s three cultural dominants exist in China synchronically instead of diachronically and make up a unique panorama of art. Comparatively speaking, the situation of modernism in China is very complicated. It could exist earlier than realism and later than postmodernism or

²⁸ Justin Armstrong, “The Contested Gallery: Street Art, Ethnography and the Search for Urban Understandings,” *AmeriQuests*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2005), <http://ejournals.library.vanderbilt.edu/index.php/ameriquests/article/view/46/37>

contemporary art. The modernist phantom has and continues to haunt Chinese art in unpredictable ways.

Since modernism was welcome by traditional Chinese aesthetics, it could have come to China at the same time as or even earlier than the realism of 1920s. But Chinese society at that time was not yet ready to accept modernism. Both modernism and traditional Chinese aesthetics were soon surpassed by socialist realism. Realism and politicized art were praised as proletarian art and aesthetics, while modernism and Chinese *literati* tradition were criticized as bourgeois or aristocratic. According to Marxist historical materialism, the former is newer and thus more advanced than the latter. This is why I say that modernism came to China too early its first time.

After the Great Cultural Revolution, modernism came to China for the second time. Chinese society was ready to accept modernism, and it almost won the fight against socialist realism. However, the international shift from modernism to contemporary art stopped the growth of modernism. Modernism came to China too late its second time.

Contemporary art is suffering from conceptual insufficiency, Western cultural centralization, and the unresolved idea of progress. In order to save art from reaching its end, Chinese artists mix the traditional and the contemporary, the West and the Chinese, and create new styles and movements of art, such as the New Ink Art Movement. New ink art is not radical, but eclectic and somehow reminiscent of modernism. Could this Chinese version of modernism infect the Western art world? Could ink art paint a white box black? For visitors crowded in the Ink Art exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the answer is patently yes.