

Chronology of Chinese Avant-Garde Art, 1979–1993

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The Cultural Revolution, a period when selfless devotion to Mao Zedong and his ideology dominated Chinese art and life, ended in 1976 when Mao died. But the change in leadership did not immediately result in new cultural values or art styles. In the years 1977 and 1978, most mainstream artists continued to use the hyperbolic style of the Cultural Revolution, substituting only some new leaders, historical figures, and revolutionary heroes for the characters seen in paintings from the time of the Cultural Revolution. (We have dubbed this tendency “Post-Cultural Revolutionism.”) During this two-year period, only a few small-scale shows were held in which artists displayed apolitical works such as landscapes and portraits and so challenged previous conventions that demanded political subject matter in art.

An important period of political change began late in 1978 when leaders including Deng Xiaoping initiated reform programs that emphasized increased openness to the West. Intellectuals and the public responded with the “Beijing Spring” Democracy Movement, which flourished from November of 1978 to March of 1979. At this time, intellectuals began questioning the foundations of Maoist ideology with philosophical and cultural debates regarding the nature of reality in China and the value of the individual human being. This questioning spirit and the concurrent influx of Western ideas influenced the occurrence and development of Chinese avant-garde art.

1979

The two most important trends in contemporary art in 1979, Scar Painting and the activities of the Star Group, both involved political choices of subject matter and were intended to criticize the realities of contemporary China. Scar Painting was a form of critical realism that took its name from a related literary movement named after a short story, “Scar,” by Lu Xinhua. The term refers to the emotional wounds inflicted on the Chinese populace, especially intellectuals, students, and some old cadres, by the Cultural Revolution. Artists and writers alike often chose subjects that allowed them to portray the Cultural Revolution in a negative light. Cheng Conglin’s painting *A Certain Month of a Certain Day in 1968* and the illustrations by Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Ben to Zheng Yi’s short story “Maple,” for example, describe the tragic results of Red Guard battles during the Cultural Revolution.

The main intent of the Stars was to criticize the Cultural Revolution and the continuing oppression of citizens by the authorities. Members of the group worked in previously forbidden modern Western styles, ranging from post-impressionism to abstract expressionism, and the decision to use these styles in itself implied criticism of the cultural status quo. The Stars’ first, and most notorious, exhibition took place in late September 1979, when members hung their work on the fence outside the Chinese National Art Gallery without prior permission. After this display was disrupted by the police, the artists posted a notice at Democracy Wall and held a protest march. Their first formal exhibition was held in Beihai Park in Beijing between November 23 and December 2, 1979, with 163 works by 23 unofficial artists. In August 1980, they exhibited at the Chinese National Art Gallery, this time with official approval. Even so, the exhibition became controversial after the authorities criticized some works for their political

content. Wang Keping's wooden sculpture *Idol*, which turns the image of Mao Zedong into a Buddha and so criticizes the seeming deification of Mao by his successors, is typical of these artists' works. Soon thereafter the Star artists began leaving China.

A significant point in the development of apolitical approaches to artmaking came in September 1979, when several murals were unveiled at the Beijing International Airport. Yuan Yunsheng's *Water-Splashing Festival: Ode to Life*, one of the airport murals, included nude female figures, and this triggered a serious controversy over nudity in public art. After an extended debate, the controversial section of the wall was boarded over in 1981.

1980–1981

A new trend, Rustic Realism, appeared in 1980. The artists who developed this tendency produced unidealized images of the daily lives of ordinary poor people from the countryside and border regions of China. Chen Danqing's *Tibetan Series*, exhibited in October 1980 at the Central Academy of Fine Arts graduation exhibition, and Luo Zhongli's *Father*, which won first place in the *Second National Youth Art Exhibition* in December, are particularly influential examples of Rustic Realism. Some filmmakers, such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who emerged in the mid- and late 1980s were affected by this movement and incorporated influences from its imagery in their work. Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) have recently been distributed widely and critically acclaimed in the West.

The liveliest artistic activity in the period between 1979 and 1981 took place in a limited number of unofficial and quasi-official art groups that developed in various parts of China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, and Kunming. Most of the artists involved in these groups devoted themselves to formal questions, particularly problems of abstract beauty.

1982–1984

An anti-Western political movement known as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement was launched in early 1982. Intended to counteract the Western influences that authorities feared were "polluting" the Chinese people's spirit and commitment to communism, the movement continued until late 1984. In the fields of philosophy and literature, the movement criticized humanism. In the art world, the authorities condemned what they saw as three faults that had developed since the end of the Cultural Revolution: Western individualistic values, "art for art's sake," and abstract art. Some articles discussing abstract art in neutral or positive terms that had been published in *Art Monthly*, the official art journal, were attacked by the authorities as examples of "spiritual pollution."

The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement had a chilling effect on all forms of experimentation in art. The authorities responsible for official art exhibitions, like all officials in the country, responded to this conservative political movement, and its influence was evident in the works chosen for exhibitions. For example, many of the works included in the National Exhibition of October 1984 (the sixth held since 1949) resurrected the political themes of the Cultural Revolution. The extraordinarily backward appearance of this exhibition caused a widespread psychological and political backlash in the Chinese art world.

1985

1985 was the most important year for the Chinese avant-garde art movement. Reflecting the end of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement, the art world began to react against the restraints on artistic practice imposed during the previous three years. The most important change was the widespread appearance of lively unofficial groups, in which artists met, talked, and exhibited. Moreover, the activities of these artists and groups were promoted by newly established art maga-

Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Bin, "Maple," illustrations to a short story by Zheng Yi, 1979.

Wang Keping, *Idol*, wooden sculpture, 1980.





Ren Jian, *Primeval Chaos*, ink on polyester, 1987.

Geng Jianyi, *Second Situation*, oil on canvas, 1987.

zines and newspapers, such as *Fine Arts in China* (Beijing), *Artistic Currents* (Hubei), and *Painters* (Hunan). The editors of these publications often were young critics who were sympathetic to avant-garde art, and they published information about the avant-garde groups and supported their activities.

Between 1985 and 1987, more than 80 unofficial artistic groups sprang up in 29 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions of China. This sudden and widespread phenomenon, which came to be called the “’85 Movement,” was part of a broader movement that involved all areas of contemporary culture. The artists and their supporters sought to emphasize the value of individual human beings in Chinese society, freedom of creation in art, and a radical overhaul of artistic concepts and forms. The artists criticized both Chinese traditional art and realist art. To do this, they selected ideas from Western modern and postmodern art, such as surrealism, dada, pop art, and conceptual art. In 1985 and 1986, these informal artistic groups held at least 149 avant-garde exhibitions and meetings, and at least 2250 young artists participated in such activities. The rapid and unofficial expansion of styles new to China created controversy among artists and was criticized by conservative Chinese authorities.

Among the many groups that played a role in the avant-garde art movement was the Art Group of the North, founded in March in Harbin, Heilongjiang—the area formerly known as Manchuria. This group promoted a “Civilization of the North,” which its artists believed would surpass both Western and traditional Chinese civilization. Their paintings, similar in style to surrealism, often involved landscape elements and abstract forms suggested by the glacial north of China. Ren Jian’s *Primeval Chaos* is an example. The Art Group of the North remained active until 1987.

In May the *Exhibition of Young Artists of Progressive China* took place in Beijing. The most remarkable works in this show might be described as a kind of “neo-realist” painting. This approach, typified by Meng Luding’s *Enlightenment of Adam and Eve in the New Age*, used realistic techniques but was intended to convey and inspire individual spiritual awakening.

Another group of artists was the Pond Society, which was based in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, a port city in eastern China. The works in its first show, the ‘85 *New Space Exhibition*, had a biting spirit and an absurd and humorous side, which one could call “gray humor.” The group continued to be active through 1987, and Geng Jianyi’s *Second Situation* is an example of a later work by a prominent member.

Three other particularly influential avant-garde groups founded in 1985 were the Red Brigade, the Art Group of Southwest China, and the Three-Step Studio. The Red Brigade organized the *Large-Scale Modern Art Exhibition* in Nanjing in July. The Art Group of Southwest China exhibited in Shanghai and Nanjing in September. The Three-Step Studio held its first exhibition in Taiyuan in Shanxi province in December. Some of the works in the Three-Step Studio exhibition were installations formed from parts of tools used by peasants in everyday life. Other activities by this group included sound installations and performance pieces. The Three-Step Studio remained active through 1987.

In November, Gu Wenda exhibited his work in the *Exhibition of Recent Works of Traditional Chinese Painting* in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in central China. He combined traditional techniques and Western modern art styles, such as surrealism, to express his desire to surpass both traditional Chinese art and Western art. One work consisted of a calligraphic "dismemberment" of Chinese characters into different parts, separated in order to form new characters. The artist continued this direction in works such as *Stillness Begets Inspiration*, which was shown in a solo exhibition displayed privately in the Gallery of Fine Art in the north central city of Xian, Shaanxi, in May of the next year.

1986

In April 1986 and May 1987, Wu Shanzhuan and his fellow artists in Hangzhou held two private exhibitions of installations titled *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White* and *Red Humor*. Wu himself created a related series entitled *Red Characters* in 1987.

Xiamen Dada, a group led by Huang Yongping in Xiamen, a port city in the southeastern coastal province of Fujian, held an exhibition titled *Xiamen Dada: Modern Art Exhibition* in September 1986. At the same time, Huang published an article titled *Xiamen Dada: Postmodernism?* in which he proposed combining dadaism and Chan (Zen) Buddhism. He also made a series of roulette wheel-like compositions based on the *Yi Jing*, or *Book of Changes*, which he used to direct his painting.

In August 1986, the first symposium about the '85 Movement and the Chinese avant-garde was held in Zhuhai, Guangdong in southeastern China. One feature of the meeting was a slide display. Participants at the meeting decided to hold a national avant-garde art exhibition, the first show of that kind, and began planning for it. In November, the Chinese Modern Art Research Group, an association of about thirty critics,

was established in Beijing, in part to organize this exhibition.

Student demonstrations took place in various Chinese cities in late 1986. In response, the authorities launched a campaign against "bourgeois liberalism," targeting all Western trends. The campaign continued until mid-1988, significantly hampering the activities of the avant-garde art movement.

1987

An organizational meeting for the national avant-garde art exhibition was held on March 25 and 26. The exhibition was given the working title "All-China Young Artists Scholarly Communication Exhibition" and scheduled for July 1987. However, in the atmosphere created by the ongoing campaign against bourgeois liberalism, government officials responded on April 4 by issuing a document prohibiting all organized activities involving nationwide scholarly communication, especially among young people. As a consequence, organizational work for the exhibition and the activities of the Chinese Modern Art Research Group were forced to stop.

In August, a solo exhibition of Gu Wenda's work opened at the University Arts Gallery of York University in Toronto. The artist left China at the time of this exhibition and subsequently settled in New York City.

1988

Following the end of the campaign against bourgeois liberalism, some avant-garde activities resumed or began anew in autumn and winter.

In October, Xu Bing held a solo exhibition of his woodcuts, including his *Book of Heaven*, at the Chinese National Art Gallery in Beijing. *Book of Heaven* consists of many books and scrolls of printed text fabricated

using traditional Chinese techniques and papers and classical typographic styles. The thousands of hand-carved characters, however, were made up by the artist and so are completely unintelligible to anyone.

In November, the 1988 Chinese Avant-Garde Convention opened in Tunxi, a famous scenic site in the province of Anhui. About a hundred artists and critics from all of China participated in the convention.



The Chinese National Art Gallery on the occasion of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, Feb. 5, 1989.

Xiao Lu firing a gun at her installation, *Dialogue*, which resulted in the police closing the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, Feb. 5, 1989.

1989

Delayed by political circumstances, financial problems, and the forces of tradition, the first nationwide avant-garde art exhibition (originally scheduled for July 1987) finally opened, as *China/Avant-Garde*, on February 5 at the Chinese National Art Gallery in Beijing. A total of 293 paintings, sculptures, videos, and installations by 186 artists—including Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan, Huang Yongping, and Gu Wenda—were displayed. Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong, No. 1* was one of the most notorious works in the show, and this artist's pop art-derived style became very influential. Unfortunately the exhibition was closed by the authorities twice during its two-week run. The first closing, three hours after the

opening, was the result of artist Xiao Lu converting her installation into a performance by firing two gunshots into it. The second closure resulted from anonymous bomb threats sent to the gallery, the municipal government, and the Beijing Public Security Bureau.

An installation by Huang Yongping was included in *Magiciens de la Terre*, a major exhibition organized by the Pompidou Center in Paris. The artist left China to attend this exhibition and has subsequently lived in France.

With the cultural crackdown that followed the June Tiananmen Square demonstrations, the national avant-garde exhibition was castigated in the press as a typical example of bourgeois liberalism. Also as a result of the crackdown, art activity in China diminished drastically.

1990–1992

Xu Bing and Wu Shanzhuan left China during 1990. Many of the Chinese artists living in Europe or the United States developed active international careers, participating in a variety of solo and group exhibitions.

The *Chine Demain pour hier* exhibition took place in Pourrières in southern France in 1990. Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping—with his outdoor installation *Fire Ritual*—and five other artists participated. *Exceptional Passage*, an exhibition of Chinese avant-garde artists, was held at the Fukuoka Museum in Japan during 1991. Gu Wenda's *Vanishing 36 Pigment Golden Sections*, Huang Yongping's *Emergency Exit*, and works by three other artists were included.

In 1990, Xu Bing held a solo exhibition at Lung Men Art Gallery in Taipei, Taiwan. In 1991, his *Book of Heaven* was exhibited at Tokyo Gallery, Japan, and at the Elvehjem Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where the artist was a visiting fellow. *Three Installations by Xu Bing*, the exhibition at the University of Wisconsin, also included *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, the artist's rubbing of a section of the Great Wall.

Huang Yongping participated in the *Carnegie International* exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Gu Wenda participated in the exhibition *New York Diary: Almost 25 Different Things* at P.S. 1 in New York City.

In China in 1991, an exhibition of works by two avant-garde artists, Feng Mengbo and Zhang Bo, at Central Academy of Fine Arts Middle School Contemporary Arts Gallery in Beijing, was closed by the Public Security Bureau.

In November 1992, the *China Oil Painting Biennial Exhibition* took place in Guangzhou. Some artists displayed works exemplifying the dominant trend in China after Tiananmen, Political Pop. An important goal of the exhibition, which was developed under official policies urging economic expansion, was to strengthen the position of the avant-garde movement in the art market.

1993

In China, a performance titled *Great Expense* that was to include rock music, painting, and a fashion show was planned by an artists' group, known as the New History Group, led by Ren Jian, who had been active in the Art Group of the North during the early years of the avant-garde movement. This event was scheduled to take place at the new McDonald's restaurant in Beijing on April 28. At midnight on April 27, the Beijing Public Security Bureau summoned the artists for questioning and informed them that the activity could not take place.

Many avant-garde artists, including Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan, and Gu Wenda, exhibited in *China's New Art, Post-1989* at Hanart TZ Gallery in Hongkong. The show then traveled to the Contemporary Art Museum in Sydney, Australia. Although the exhibition included a range of work, the dominant trend represented was Political Pop. The artists of Political Pop present political irony instead of reality. The most prevalent mode is a



Wang Guangyi, *Coca Cola* from the *Great Castigation* series, oil on canvas, 1989.

style that combines socialist realist or Cultural Revolution imagery with the irreverent characteristics of American pop art. Most of the Political Pop artists were previously idealistic participants in the '85 Movement; their new iconography is mainly based on China's best-known portrait, that of Mao Zedong, on official political slogans, on political events, or on themes and images from the cultural Revolution. The show also displayed the works of some younger artists who deal only with the most boring aspects of personal lives in which they appear to have lost all faith; their themes often take the form of bitter mockery or self-mockery. Thirteen artists from this exhibition, including Wu Shanzhuan and Xu Bing, were selected for the Venice Biennale.