

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

GU WENDA

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise

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Gu Wenda (GW): I went to Zhejiang Academy in 1979...

Jane DeBevoise (JD): As a graduate student?

(GW): Yes, and I didn't have a bachelor degree.

(JD): So how did you do that? Obviously you needed to prepare for the exams. What kind of reading material did you study from?

(GW): It was the first time schools opened after the Cultural Revolution. I didn't have any concept of what a Master degree was, and I didn't have any formal preparation. The school system, even today, has a lot of problems; there is a lack of system. For me, that time was really fantasy-like. I was so desperate to get into the degree program. I didn't know Lu Yanshao [陆俨少] personally, my Master-to-be. At the time, I was working at a woodcarving factory in Shanghai and I was designing a lot of folk art, which I hated. Two professors from Zhejiang Academy saw my landscape painting for the first time in Shanghai, and they were very interested. The two of them did research for Lu Yanshao for most of the Academy's acceptances so that is how I became a graduate student.

(JD): So your work was shown at the Shanghai Art Gallery?

(GW): Yes, that was the first time my work was on show, I don't know which Chinese army anniversary it was, but the theme was decided in celebration of the army. The gallery chose two of my landscape paintings about Mao's revolutionary places because they were 'appropriate'. The professors approached me and told me the Zhejiang Academy was going to have a Master degree program under Lu Yanshao. I was so excited, even though I didn't know who Lu Yanshao was at the time. My dream was to get into the Academy and to become a good artist.

(JD): Did you have to take an exam?

(GW): Yes, it was tough. They were only going to select five from a large pool of applicants. Only five, nationwide! It's not like Master programs today, everyone gets to go somewhere. It was so tough. I had no clue too - I remember getting really sweaty - I was nervous but just tried to do things properly to get accepted. There was an oral component to the test too.

(JD): So the first part was taken in Shanghai?

(GW): Yes, at a test center. The test, if you look at it today, was not professionally written, but at that time, it was good enough.

(JD): Do you remember what was on the test?

(GW): It was a Chinese classical literature test. Tang poems, wenyan [文言], art history, and the most important part - creative work. The reason I amazed Lu Yanshao, as he later told his students, was that I made seven pieces for the creating work component, not just one, like most test takers. I submitted all seven to the school too, and this impressed Lu Yanshao. So my chance for one of the five acceptances was high.

(Q): Can you tell us what year the Shanghai exhibit was? Do you remember?

(GW): It took place in '76. It was my first time exhibiting work. The subject matter was, of course, revolution-related. At that time, there were few people painting landscapes, unless they had something to do with harvest, politics or the revolution...with farmers and red flags, of course.

(JD): So you took the exam in 1978 or '79. Do you remember?

(GW): '79...it was 1979. I remember I waited so long for the oral test announcement after part one, the written component. I was excited, but I didn't really pay attention because I didn't know Lu Yanshao and in many ways I wasn't considered a fine artist. I worked for a woodcarving factory! So I really didn't think I had a chance. When the announcement came and I was selected to take the oral test, my whole family was so excited. I was so happy.

(JD): What was the test like?

(GW): I can't remember the details. I think it was basically an art history test and an opportunity for the professors to understand each chosen individual. The oral test wasn't conducted by Lu Yanshao, but by other professors in the Art Department.

(JD): How did you learn art history?

(GW): It was casual learning, mostly through my own studying. I just thought about what would be best for me to think about before the test. There were no test guidelines and no preparatory materials available. It was totally immature preparation, and everything was conducted by chance. I didn't have a clue; I didn't study Chinese art history, but my private tutor gave me some material to read, and that was it. Very spontaneous studying, - learning bits and pieces here and there. Only five were selected nationwide because this was the first time a Master program opened in China. So many people of different age groups applied. I was one of the youngest. My classmates were twelve, thirteen years older than me. After I graduated, I stayed at the Academy to teach.

(JD): When you first started studying with Lu Yanshao, what was your impression of him?

(GW): To be honest, I was really rebellious. I didn't know the Chinese art tradition well. I just wanted to get into the program, to get training, to become a professional artist. At the time I thought 'Who cares about these traditional things!' Now, in retrospect, some of the most important things I learned were because of him. Back then I didn't really pay much attention. I thought I wanted to be a contemporary artist and that meant I wanted to finish school and go on to doing my own things. In terms of method, I did look at other works, but I didn't want to copy anything otherwise my work would never be mine. I wanted to digest and absorb what I read and looked at and then have it become my own. All my energy went into contemporary art when I was in school. My classical training techniques have come out more in my later years, and my ink painting has improved.

(JD): That's interesting. Wanting to be a contemporary artist is a relatively contemporary perspective. What was your idea of a 'contemporary artist' at that time? This was early 1979 through '81. Where did this perspective come from? At that time, even at Zhejiang Academy, they were doing very Social-Realist-type work. So where did this come from?

(GW): Firstly, in my family, no one had classical, traditional Chinese painting training, so I didn't have a classical, traditional influence at home. Secondly, when I was in middle school or high school, I had a teacher who made modern, not contemporary, landscape. I was influenced by the work. I was also influenced by Li Keran's [李可

染]drawings. I never had formal traditional influences.

(JD): So you had already understood the idea of modern Chinese painting?

(GW): Yes, modern, but not contemporary. Ideas of cotemporary came when I was at Zhejiang Academy. Not from my department though. The Chinese Painting Department was still embedded in tradition and the works coming out of it were not contemporary. I had a lot of good friends from the oil painting and sculpture departments. Most of the artists who were a part of the '85 Movement graduated from the oil painting and sculpture departments. Almost none of them were from my department. I think that's what made me so unique. I was brought up on the roots of Chinese traditional painting.

(JD): I see. Obviously, if you look at Chinese contemporary painting at the time, you were hailed as one of the great innovators and potentially the greatest; as someone who could take ink painting into the 21st century. Everyone was really excited about that because no one else was really doing it. And in a truly intellectual fashion too. There was a very intellectual search and journey happening at that time.

(GW): Yes.

(JD): What were you reading? There was something called Reading Fever - were you reading a lot? Were you a part of that fever?

(GW): I can still remember things in my mind. I had the idea that if you wanted to be an excellent graduate student, you had to be good at theory, not just practice and painting. So I was obsessed with theory - I spent a lot of time reading. The one thing I should identify is that most things you read, whether they be imported or translated, influence your own Chinese study. You didn't look at things solely through Chinese philosophy - like Buddhism or Daoism. Actually, sometimes when studying Daoism you are learning about it through a Western perspective. For example, my schoolmates Wang Guangyi [王广义], Huang Yongping [黄永砅], Zhang Peili [张培力] and other artists spoke about Zen Buddhism, but not in the traditional sense. They took on a Western point of view. Everything was twisted! I don't know what is considered original anymore.

There were two points I made that made me stand out in the '85 movement, two things I didn't agree on with the others. The first was the desire to take on a very westernized perspective. At the time, I understood that Western contemporary art was important in order to break through barriers, like government regulation, but it wasn't good for learning to establish a culture of contemporaneity. Things can go both ways. There is an interview about me published with Fei Dawei [费大为]. I talk about this notion of 'going both ways'. The same time you absorb from the West should be the same time you use Chinese tradition to evaluate Western modernism, and seeing things both ways is so important for establishing cultural identity. Secondly, I was kind of reluctant to join the group, partly for personal reasons and also because I didn't want to join forces with anyone else.

I was proud of myself, and being a part of a group was only going to be a temporary act. Reality proved later, that only the leaders stayed together in the group; everyone else vanished. I never officially joined the group. Having said that, I still believe this group and group mentality is important. A group has power, and a single artist is typically powerless. That period was kind of depressing without freedom of expression. At the time, I didn't have a chance to select my major because I wasn't given a choice. But I think the way I always reflect Chinese tradition - because of my education - makes me unique.

(JD): It's very true. Most of the artists and writers I knew in the early-early 80s were not interested in things-Chinese. First of all they never had that education. Their education had been interrupted. So for me, as a student of art history, Chinese art history and Chinese studies, I actually knew more about their own Chinese traditions and histories than they did. I always thought it was really weird when I read things they didn't

already know about themselves.

(GW): Everything was related to Marxism.

(JD): Exactly right, it was all Marxism at that time. But when you went back to think about your Chinese traditions, did you go back and read Zen and Buddhist texts in their original form, as though you were reading Western philosophical texts?

(GW): To be honest, I never had a system for reading Chinese texts but I did for Western ones. I would read texts here and there, always involving myself with certain texts and paragraphs – Western culture was not my own, so I put in great effort. The only way I could learn about the West was through these books. But learning about Chinese culture is different; it's a large part of my environment; my everyday life. It's all more essential, more living, more inherent to who I am, and it doesn't matter whether one is living during the Cultural Revolution or studying with Lu Yanshao. It's like a feudal system. Lu Yanshao never adopted the Academy's system because the Academy practiced a Soviet tradition. So he never went to the classroom to teach. Every morning we went to his apartment and he would demonstrate for us. We would just watch. He would show us with few words. Sometimes he would ask us how we felt about the painting, but otherwise, he spoke little. He can write very beautiful wenyen wen [文言文], san wen [散文] and prose...all are very good. Most painters can't match his ability. But he rarely spoke; he was so polite and down-to-earth. His life was difficult though; he had a tragic life.

(JD): Despite his feudal scholar literati-type character, he was relatively supportive of his students?

(GW): Yes, yes. I was almost kicked out of the Academy when I was teaching because of my contemporary work – my lifestyle wasn't professor-like. I spent time with the students, and acted like a student, and the students were my friends. They loved me, and we had lots of fun. That was not the way the Academy wanted teachers to be. I used to dance to Michael Jackson with my students too, every weekend! Oh, it was crazy and fun. The Chinese professors thought I was out of my mind. They tried to kick me out during the three-month campaign and I was almost kicked out, but the movement was truncated. They sent me to teach a lower level class instead.

(JD): Wu Shanzhuan [吴山专] was in that class.

(GW): Yes, and when I became a well-known ink painter in the country, they let me teach my original class. At that time, I was also preparing to leave for the States.

(JD): So, the teachers who supported you in a way protected you...

(GW): I would say they tolerated me. They would support new Chinese ink painting, but not vanguard contemporary painting, ink-related installation, mixed media, or performance. Lu Yanshao had a broader heart to let you work on your own things. But he still thinks I was the only one he allowed to do these 'other' things. I was later told, that with other graduate school oral tests, one question would be 'What do you think about Gu Wenda?' And some would answer 'I think he is the wild horse, not the handsome or beautiful horse.' That was the right answer. If the students said anything positive about me, they probably wouldn't have been selected. But Lu Yanshao always supported me; I wouldn't have stayed at the Academy if it weren't for him. Another supporter of mine was Pan Tianshou's [潘天寿] son, Pan Gongkai [潘公凯]. He was the professor of art history in the Chinese department and he always supported the new ink works I made. At that time, he was the editor-in-chief of the Academy's magazine and he put my work on the cover.

(JD): And that magazine was called –

(GW): *Xin Meishu* [《新美术》]. And of course, he selected the work that wasn't totally vanguard. Something

between tradition and, well, the outrageous stuff. He was proud he did this, I remember. He always mentioned this in his classes too, that he supported new Chinese art. I think he believed in the freedoms of research instead of pure instruction.

(JD): Broader perspective and greater confidence.

(GW): Yes, yes. And artists who tried to eliminate you from the pool and who were very into politics weren't that good.

(JD): Did you have a graduation work when getting your Master's; a final work that you had to do?

(GW): Yes, the Masters program was two years. The final half-year, we were focusing on our graduate thesis and paintings. I made symbolic works, semi-Surrealist, semi-Romantic works. My subject matter was Liszt's piano works from Hungary. I think Liszt was the son-in-law of Wagner. I was very much into music, so I married Chinese painting with music, and Lu Yan said in a thesis article that he didn't understand anything about the work I was making. (Laughter)

(JD): Do you still have a copy of your thesis?

(GW): (Laughter) I do. When I look back, I think it's all quite embarrassing. I can't bear it!

(JD): I understand completely; when I think about the silly things I did in highschool, I feel the same way. But it's interesting to hear about. It helps develop your sense of –

(GW): Yes, but the things I did for my graduate thesis couldn't be published, as instructed by the Deputy President.

(JD): Who was the Deputy President at the time?

(GW): Wang Dewei [王德威]. His son is now at the Academy. I think he is one of the department heads. Wang Duwei's children all received their education in France.

(JD): So it was never published, but you were able to graduate. Was the work exhibited?

(GW): Yes, yes. I didn't have a strong memory because I was so involved in my own world; I was naïve, and I also spent my time working for the '85 Movement. At the time, if I didn't graduate, it wouldn't have mattered to me. I really was quite immature. Another figure, Kong Zhongqi [孔仲起], also a painter at Zhejiang Academy – I think he is the 76th generation of Confucius – he was someone who quietly supported me, even though he made traditional landscape paintings. He was the one who said I should be a professor, and got me in. I didn't know this until later; someone told me. I just remember being so focused on the Movement that nothing else really mattered.

(JD): I remember you started exhibiting in Japan or something – just your work, not you.

(GW): The work traveled to many different places, I didn't go myself as the government arranged most of the exhibits. My more traditional, new paintings were placed in those exhibitions. That was sort of the routine. I didn't really pay attention to them.

(JD): Well, the work that you did paid attention to... When did that start?

(GW): (Laughter) That work I've always had trouble with, ever since the start. There were several incidents though...I got the biggest exposure through Peng De [彭德], from '84 to '85 in Wuhan through the New Chinese Painting invitational. Many of the 'new' paintings from different generations of artists were exhibited there.

I got big exposure because my works were large and the first time I showed my series of fake, created

characters, they stood out because the rest of the Chinese ink painting on show was primarily pictographic, not conceptual.

(JD): So it was all ink painting. Did you show the one with the pyramid installation?

(GW): No. The pyramid, though, brought me nationwide attention. For the next one or two years, the Shaanxi Research Institute and the Chinese Artists Association [中国美协] organized a national conference on Chinese painting theory. They invited two Chinese painters, one contemporary painter and one orthodox painter.

(JD): Let's just go back for a second to the exhibition arranged by Peng De. Is that when you started exhibiting your work formally?

(GW): Peng De, Pi Daojian [皮道坚] ...there were several people involved. And one official: Zhou Shaohua [周韶华].

(JD): Yes, he was very open-minded at the time.

(GW): He was still quite old school, but compared to everyone else he was very straight forward and yes, open-minded. He [Peng De] could 'talk' because of his political power. Everyone listened to him, and helped him arrange this show.

(JD): There was a festival too, where they let kids do things, and then there was a magazine as well...can you describe the work for the exhibition, and what you were thinking about? Did you prepare the work specifically for that exhibition?

(GW): Yes. At the beginning, the concept wasn't that clear – it wasn't like preparing for my solo show in Xi'an, where I had the whole thing sorted out, with the installation, performance photographs, work all organized and in line. Instead, it was more like a test-drive, at the beginning of my career. I had three sources of influence to do this work. Wittgenstein's language philosophy was one. The other thing I studied intently was script. To me, illegible script is more creative, more illusionary and imaginative than normal script. I felt so free when working with illegible words. I thought, 'There must be a meaning, I just don't understand it yet'. And then the Cultural Revolution was my third influence...the big poster and the colors, red, black and white. I thought the flavor and format of the big poster imbued passion and belief, instead of big copied forms. The blue collared class made these posters. Actually, it's interesting; in their writing, there is a lot of mis-writing, so that became an influence for me. I still believe that if you compare this to all the calligraphy after 1949, those filled with the most life are the big calligraphic posters, even though they are not aesthetically related to the literati or scholarly tradition. Maybe I looked at them from a Western contemporary point of view, not from a traditional one. If I looked at it from a tradition point of view, I probably wouldn't take it, I think it was just junk.

(JD): Just to go back to talking about influences to your work – is that something you thought about retrospectively or were you very conscious of it at the time? Let's take for example the Cultural Revolution characters. Sometimes, when things are so close to you, you don't even see them, but you were able to step back to take a look at this in a way that was fairly distant and critical, in a sense. Did you collect calligraphy, and what was it about it that gave you an ability to 'see it'?

(GW): I think it was the timing. The Cultural Revolution ended in '76. At that time, I didn't have a clue about anything, or about poster as pop culture. That's why I often say I look at many Chinese traditions from a Western point of view. It wasn't until I was in the Zhejiang Academy, where I studied literature and philosophy, where I began to re-look at these things. I started thinking about using the Cultural Revolution's big posters in 1983. That was many years after the Revolution. During the Revolution, I was overtly zealous and didn't know how to use these ideas as 'cultural elements'. I didn't have this kind of sophistication. It was

only until later on.

I started creating the first fake seal in '83 for a series of symbolic ink paintings I made before leaving for the States. And also to confirm my idea that Cultural Revolution calligraphy is the liveliest calligraphy. My mind could digest more at this time, and I could look at things from different angles. Creation time was more experimental. Retrospectively, I saw a level of maturation develop at this time.

(JD): So the Wuhan show was in '84?

(GW): '84, 85, I have to check. That was the earliest international show for New Chinese Painting. After this, there was *xin wenrenhua* [新文人画] and others...there were many different things like that coming out. And then Pi Daojian and Peng De named my works surrealistic and universal, also stating the works had excellent brushwork. Some young artists don't have both the conceptual and brushwork down. I tried to blend both extremes in my work. This was always my theory, whether it be installation, ink painting or land art.

(JD): At the time when you had the Wuhan show, Pi Daojian and Peng De were fairly young. Did you have lots of conversations with them? Did they talk to you?

(GW): No, no...I don't know, I wasn't really affiliated with them; they had Huangshan meetings and Zhuhai meetings, but I never attended. And in Gao Minglu's [高明潞] writing, he specifically mentioned that I never got involved, but he's more an insider than others. He also mentioned it again in his first book about contemporary Chinese art, which he published in...the 90s.

(JD): Yes, 1992.

(GW): Shanghai published it beforehand.

(JD): But you didn't sit down with them to have conversations over long periods of time?

(GW): I had conversations with my schoolmates, and we would always exchange ideas about poetry and aesthetics. We had good conversations. Fei Dawei was in Beijing, and came down to interview. Actually, these two articles made everyone famous. It was the first article for Fei Dawei, and most known article for Fan Jingzhong [范景中], and the editor of the issue was Gao Minglu. It was the first time a vanguard artist was able to have several pages in a conservative magazine. Even by today's standards, it's considered very conservative.

(JD): Right, right.

(GW): It was co-organized by Chinese Artists Association. Now it looks like a terrible magazine.

(JD): Not just conservative but also quite commercial.

(GW): Yes, terrible, terrible!

(JD): Tacky.

(GW): Yes. This magazine can symbolize the whole Cultural Ministry. They don't have a better idea, and they don't hire better people to do things.

(JD): At that time, there were issues of *Meishu* [《美术》] magazine that were very good.

(GW): The Shanghai artist Zhang Jianjun [张健君] was on the cover. And after this issue, Gao Minglu resigned, probably from the pressures of publishing this issue.

(JD): Yes, it was a very good issue.

(GW): And then Liu Xiaochun [刘骁纯], from the Research Institute. He was the editor-in-chief of *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* [《中国美术报》]. So he made the pages for my Xi'an show that closed down.

(JD): Let's go to the Xi'an show for a second. For the Xi'an show, you started to conceive of the show as a full program.

(GW): It was my first solo show. Actually, I got this chance from the Wuhan show. Cheng Zheng's [程征] specialty is folk art, and Shaanxi has a lot of folk art. He came to my Academy and asked if I was willing to do a show in conjunction with a national symposium. Of course I thought this was a great opportunity, because during this period, work could only really be exchanged between studios, not on a national level, let alone with an official symposium. Cheng Zheng [程征] warned me and said 'You can do whatever you want to do for the show, but there is a chance that the show may not exist'. He knew the situation. I spent a whole summer there and a year in my studio to prepare the installation, as well as the series of works for the show.

(JD): So you prepared the works for a hall? Because we don't have pictures of the installation – Zhongguo Meishu Bao [《中国美术报》] has small gray pictures of it, but only some poor reproductions. Can you describe the room, the exhibition, the atmosphere, as you remember it? What did you see?

(GW): The gallery was called the Xi'an Artist Gallery, situated in the center of Xi'an, but the symposium took place in Yang Ling, an ancient town, outside of Xi'an. And we had two exhibitions, one was Huang Qiuyuan, orthodox, not like Lu Yanshao full of life and vibrations, but a dead scholar, and his strokes weren't even good. But that was also what made him famous and later he became quite important, bridging tradition and scholarly thought but I don't think...well, I find the work quite amateur and not fully literati-like. They gave us three rooms. The second floor had a lower ceiling so I had the ground floor, with extremely high ceilings, perfect for my large scrolls. My contemporary ink work went on the third floor, or fourth floor, I can't remember. My traditional ink paintings were shown to 'protect' me. I made thirty kinds of traditional, beautiful landscapes for the upper floor. The traditional works exhibition space never closed. Translations... when I read translations, like Nietzsche, for example, the preface always says 'We are translated, we translate these books for you to criticize...' (Laughter) I mean, a translator needs to be passionate about translating – otherwise what is the point?

(JD): So the pieces upstairs were relatively small scale and framed?

(GW): Yes, I didn't really pay attention to them at the time. My focus was on the work downstairs. And actually, after the work was all displayed –

(JD): Let's say this room, a hall-like gallery -

(GW): Yes. Rectangular and huge.

(JD): And the large scrolls were all around it, and at that point were the deformed character script works there too?

(GW): Yes, and print-style calligraphy; my round character calligraphy was there too.

(JD): The artwork titled *Zheng Fan* was in the show too?

(GW): Yes, a lot of important works were there.

(JD): Also, the one where you cross out characters written by other people, was that in the show?

(GW): Yes, that was part of the very first performance, done by my six students. I made the cross. Obviously, a Cultural Revolution influence. You cross out the bad person, and leave the good person. This piece reminds me; I crossed the name of my elementary teacher out – it was great fun. Now I can do anything to the teacher, I really didn't have a clue in those days ...

Everyone interprets things differently. Right before the opening, the Chairman of Shaanxi Artists Association, for the sake of his security, invited the Department of Propaganda to do a walk through of the show. I didn't know this at the time. They then informed me that the show wouldn't open. The Artists Gallery hallway

outside the exhibition space was filled with students from the Xi'an Academy. Many students were really angry and wanted to carry the work into the street, but of course the door was locked. That time, Liu Wenxi, my schoolmate, was President of the Xi'an Academy. He told his graduate students, who then told me later, 'Don't look at Gu Wenda's show, otherwise you can't be a graduate student, because this kind of work is...you know...'

(JD): Was anyone allowed to see the work?

(GW): Later on, the show became an episodic adventure of sorts – only professional artists were allowed to have a look, and they needed a certificate from the Chairman of the Association to see the show. At that time, I was really young, and things like the government, PR, and marketing just didn't matter that much to me. I only cared about art. 'If the officials came to close the show, fine! If the show will open, great!' I just wanted to make good work. I was so naïve, so idealistic. So the show did end up closing and it didn't matter that much to me. I didn't protest and didn't have a desire to. The ironic thing was that after the show closed, the exhibition became nationally recognized. That was the peak of my experience.

The Star Group was more politically oriented and I wasn't. I was just more interested in playing with language. I had no intention of trying to break taboo. I just wanted to make my own creations. I wasn't looking to break any barriers. I'm not a professional thinker or philosopher either. I just wanted my work to have a depth, and points of discovery. I never read a book in complete, like Hegel or Kant. I just read these difficult books and read bits and pieces. That's why many articles about the work say things like 'Wenda Gu's work can be a thinker's work, as well as an artist's work', it can swing back and forth. Because I don't want it to be influenced by just one book, I read several books at the same time. That way I can compare ideas. For example, let's use Kant and Hegel, or Nietzsche. Nietzsche is not a professional philosopher; he's more of a novelist, and a linguist. He's not like Hegel or Kant. But for me, his words hit my blood hard. He's more about writing like a human, not a technical philosopher, and their philosophies read that way too. So he was more influential for me. Bohua too, also German - I don't know his German name - also influenced me through Buddhism and Hinduism. And I said early on in the conversation, the vanguards in the '85 Movement were vanguards from the Western front, not the Chinese front. I don't know if it's good or bad, but without Nietzsche, without the great Western thinkers who looked at Asian things, I probably just wouldn't have looked into Chinese tradition and philosophy at all. They looked at it in a specific way and we follow in their steps.

(JD): Very interesting. Your work, I've obviously looked at a lot, had periods when the work was very surrealist, looking at the unconscious, and also very conceptual, looking at issues of language, penetrating borders, trying to show connections, inner connections between things –

(GW): Yes, these were really special for me. I worked with two extremes and was interested in marrying these paradoxical ideas.

(JD): And trying to show, not necessarily the conflicts, but the connections, the fluidity into which you are able to transgress – there is a lot of transgression in your works.

(GW): Yes. The same thing can be said differently by the Western thinkers and by the Eastern thinkers. When I read these books, I was very picky. I wanted to find conflict among the books. I want to pick up on these conflicts. Another thing to specify are their similarities. Though conceptually different, they are the same species. This is how I examine books. Normally, when you read a philosophy book, you want to note a central concept, but this has never been my way. I am more interested in picking up the conflicts and similarities that appear. This is one mode of research for me.

(JD): And you really actually did research those days.

(GW): Yes, I took a lot of notes. I can't find these cards though. I made cards of notes.

(JD): So your method was to write them on cards, like index cards?

- (GW):** Yes. I still remember my graduate thesis, my hand printed with rubber rolls; mimeographed. Hand printed! It's really funny. I learned a lot after I left China. When I went back to China, there was a lot of Chinese vocabulary – like computer language – that I didn't understand. I can't operate a Chinese computer because all the words are new for me. (Laughter)
- (JD):** I see. But to go back to your books, the complexity of your works that you were doing at the time obviously reflects the complexity of reading and thinking that you were doing too. I think the work is highly conceptual, and there is a certain aspect that puts you in touch with what one could call 'spiritual', and the unconscious. Another thing that Peng De once mentioned was the eroticism of the work, the sensuality of the work – so in a sense, a very conceptual work becomes erotic and sensual. It's a paradox of sorts, and it's a strange coming together of things. Can you talk a little about that too, because at the time, it was considered quite new?
- (GW):** It's kind of paradoxical because the literati Chinese tradition never allowed any of what you mentioned. I had other big influences, like social unconsciousness, like Freud. I learned most from Nietzsche and Freud. In the sense my creations, though seemingly works about words, always have sexuality to them. It's not incredibly obvious, but it's always there. Later on, I used menstrual blood. It's not just focused on sex, but also the living, the alive. That was an approach I used.
- (JD):** When Peng De wrote about 'He/She', the tapestry work, the textile work –
- (GW):** Actually, the format is similar to the crossing-out piece that you have, but the media is different, it's a woven installation instead. These two works, including the one you have in steel, are the earliest works with political influence from the Cultural Revolution. Actually, they were made much earlier than political pop. They were the earliest works I made that touch on sexuality and homosexuality. I put them together in conjunction with the big posters and writing.
- (JD):** Right. It's a very complex work, not necessarily your most successful work. There is so much going on. But it's a fascinating work, and I'd love to hear a little bit more about it. It talks about your collaboration with Maryn Varbanov, because the medium was similar to his way of working. But tell me about these lumps, they almost look like udders of a cow –
- (GW):** Yes, they are quite phallic.
- (JD):** Or gorged organs.
- (GW):** I think these tapestries contained the earliest pop, political-pop elements and three-dimensional ink too. Of course, when I look back, it's not mature work. But, it would be totally different if I made it today. The rawness wouldn't be there.
- (JD):** Yes, the roughness and rawness, I totally agree. But maybe you could talk a little bit about it.
- (GW):** I think it shows a sense of personal presence. You have a sexuality to the piece, a conceptuality to the piece, and you have the exploration of different mediums, and it's partially a performance and an installation...it's very interactive..
- (JD):** Yes. The first time Chinese artists participated in an overseas Biennale [the Lausanne Tapestry Biennale], in 1987. Can you explain how you met Varbanov, and where these materials came from?
- (GW):** Yes, this work I'll want to remake one day, but that's another issue. I don't know whose connection it was – maybe Varbanov's wife, who at the time was the representative for Pierre Cardin in China. Also, he developed Maxim Restaurants. Maybe she had a connection with Xiao Feng[肖峰], and they made a deal to invite her husband Varbanov to open a studio. Hou Hanru [侯瀚如] was very active to support this project. I was not a former member of the studio, as I was a teacher of the Chinese Painting Department. He once came to my ink studio and I was so excited by the big explosive ink paintings. He said, 'If you're interested, why don't you

come to my tapestry studio and make a tapestry piece, just come and experiment with tapestry'. He's from Bulgaria, and his work still remains in an Eastern-European tradition. I don't know what was in his mind. Maybe former members wanted something different, which is why he invited me.

(JD): Do you remember having conversations with him? That triptych that you did for Lausanne was enormous.

(GW): He never controlled me. I didn't have a clue about weaving and had to learn the basics. I didn't want sophisticated weaving though; that wasn't my purpose. My purpose was ink as a medium. He let me explore. Surprisingly, the Academy didn't say anything – well, I suppose, because I was working with him. Without him, maybe it wouldn't have happened. The school and government didn't say or force anything upon Varbanov. He's not a famous artist, quite a normal artist really, but it was really rare to have a foreigner establish a studio during that period of time. This was a very unique case. It was a good thing too. My Academy subscribed to over 100 magazines from abroad. Varbanov was a good influence.

(JD): Yes, it was a very unusual Academy. My theory is that tapestry work was considered 'applied art', so it appeared outside of the more academic work and faced fewer restraints because of this. So you could argue that it was given a little bit more leeway, as it may have been considered more decorative art not fine art...

(GW): I can interpret this idea very well, because I was at a woodcarving factory for a long time and I hated it. I wanted to do things a different way, the fine arts way, not the crafts way. The work was rough and vivid. That's why the work captured attention at the Biennale, and it was published everywhere very early on. When China attended Lausanne.

(JD): Did you personally go?

(GW): I got my visa to go to America, so I didn't really care about going to Lausanne. Lausanne sent me an invitation, but the President of the Academy said 'Wenda Gu cannot go', so he went in my place instead. (Laughter)

(JD): These triptychs almost look like a stage –

(GW): That time, my works were always structured symmetrically, and I thought about them in relation to the church and architecture –

(JD): Like a temple –

(GW): Yes, a somewhat religious approach, but not religious doctrine, just approach. Approach as grand, and powerful, to give power to the people! That was my approach.

(JD): I see, interesting. I see it in the work. It was awe-inspiring.

(GW): I wanted that power in the work.

(JD): It creates a sense of excitement, aspiration in the people looking at it. It's very interesting. The term 'installation art' – were they talking about it at the time?

(GW): Yes, they already were. One side is raw, and my instincts told me the work had to be three-dimensional. To wrap the audience. I wanted these paintings to be big paintings on the wall and for all the paintings to be viewed as one cohesive unit. This was always in my mind. Although I was not so clear about meaning of installation art, looking back, I think this genre of work was instinctual for me. I did look at front pages of magazines in New York, which helped me absorb their ideas of installation art. It was meaningful, and significant for me. It wasn't totally mature yet. Towards the end of the Movement, the works matured. The '85 Movement was only a few years, till June 4th. Must have been about ten years max. Chinese contemporary art is still not yet mature. We're still in the first few stages, even today. I don't think that I'm a great artist; I don't think I'm there yet.

(JD): I understand what you're saying.

- (GW):** Yes, I must say though, younger artists these days are so quick at self-promoting and are commercially savvy.
- (JD):** Let's talk about 'He/She' again. It's a very strange work, but a very interesting work because there is a lot going on, and a lot of attempts to doing new things. One can tell that you were thinking hard about experimenting with the work. But what I can see was a lot of experimenting with performance. You would take the piece apart; you would stand in front of it, reassemble it, then allow movement within it. Where did this performative aspect come from?
- (GW):** To tell you the truth, I didn't have a clear mind about what I was doing. It was rawness, a need for vital expression, quite primitive in a sense. It's almost like a Renaissance, an explosion of ideas without any real conclusion.
- (JD):** Had you seen modern dance?
- (GW):** A little bit, but I was never well informed. I became informed through philosophy books, not visual elements. It really just stems from my own vocabulary; unsophisticated but in a sense quite Freudian, primitive, and I just followed action without clear concept.
- (JD):** It's very physical too.
- (GW):** Yes, physical and spontaneous. Today I look back and I don't even really know what the clear message is. It's not like the work I do now where everything has a solid message to it. These works captured the nature of the '85 Movement; with discovery but immature as well. Most of the work of that period was quite similar in nature.
- (JD):** Your work is very unique. But to go back for a second to the elements, there was a conceptual element in the sense of the unconscious, the physicality, whether it was you participating in the work through movement or engaging in it bodily, or creating an environment. And also using 'you' as a young man...
- (GW):** Yes, it was a very physical work compared to some of the other works. Because of this, I was really interested in Nietzsche's philosophy. His works aren't just logical and literary. They are about whole-life involvement. His work is more physical than conceptual, but that is my perception. I bet, today, feminists don't accept a lot of his works.
- (JD):** One of the things you alluded to at the time is that you were good friends with a lot of the students as you felt more like their own age.
- (GW):** I also had a relation with foreign student, which was really taboo at the time, especially as a teacher; as a professor. For me, I don't really – well, I understand the government's point of view. You have to understand who you are in relation to others. At the time, I didn't view people-relationships in a hierarchical way: as teacher, student, foreign or Chinese.
- (JD):** Right. We talked to Zheng Shengtian [郑胜天], and he was obviously very instrumental at bringing exchange students to Hangzhou at the time. He described some student situations, as well as teachers at the time –
- (GW):** He was the head of the foreign exchange program.
- (JD):** Right. But there was a gentleman who came at the time whose name was Bruce Parsons, who was someone who you knew.
- (GW):** Yes yes.
- (JD):** Do you remember talking to him about art? We've never interviewed him, but do you remember talking to him?
- (GW):** Yes. He was a visual arts professor with a really warm nature. He doesn't make vanguard work, but oil

paintings, like David Salle maybe.

(JD): Did you see his work at the time?

(GW): I don't have a clear memory, but he came in through the exchange program, and he was so enthusiastic, talking to a lot of people, learning...the details are vague. But he is the person who gave me the national award for visiting foreign artists. They give out awards each year through the government. He applied for me, so that when I left China, to York University in Toronto, I had my first solo show in the West.

(JD): That was in 1987?

(GW): 1987, yes; late 1987 to the beginning of 1988.

(JD): So it was because of that opportunity that you first left China.

(GW): No no, I couldn't, I wanted to leave much earlier but the school had regulations. Graduate students from the Academy had to serve the school for five years before leaving. That's why my first wife left for the US one year earlier than me. She applied to a school in San Francisco as a foreign student. I also got a collector from Utah University to promise to collect some of my ink paintings. I was lucky, I didn't have to work any other job other than my job as artist. I got the chance my first year, as a full time student, to learn English. First in San Francisco for three months, and then I went to Hunter College in New York.

(JD): Just so I can get the dates right: that was in 1987, the same year of the Lausanne show. And you were also in the US that same year?

(GW): Yes. The first time I arrived into Pasadena, Los Angeles, was the same period of the Lausanne show. I stayed only for eight days and then went to Toronto where I stayed for three months, and then I went to San Francisco and lived at Berkeley. I stayed at the home of a wealthy Jewish family. The only exchange for the rent was to walk their dog everyday. That was the only job I had in the States, other than being an artist.

(JD): You were a dog walker!

(GW): I had no clue about pets either because China didn't have this concept of 'having a pet' at the time. This was the only job I had, and for a short period. And then I went to school to study English. I'm very lucky. Even though I had a low income, I was able to maintain a career as a full time artist.

(JD): When you were in China, for what reason did you want to go to the United States? You had a great desire to go.

(GW): I was fearless and wanted to make anything and everything.

(JD): At this time, you were already quite famous in China right?

(GW): I wanted to establish my international presence, and I also wanted to experience the real cultures of the West. Since I was a child, I wanted to learn about the Western establishment. So I've always thought, in my next life, I want to be a politician, not just an artist. (Laughter) Ancient Egypt, Roman Empires...I admired these histories and wanted to experience new culture. I also wanted to establish international presence. These were my two desires.

(JD): When you were in China, you referred to reading lots of magazines. Where did you get those magazines and what aspects of the magazines were you impressed by? Do you remember certain artists or certain events that you were impressed by?

(GW): Yes, yes. They were mostly American magazines: Art in America, Art News and a magazine on art theory – but the last magazine was stopped because they didn't have money to keep it going. I didn't read English at

the time, so I just looked at the images. Zhejiang Academy subscribed to over 100 magazines from abroad.

(JD): And you would go to the library to look at these magazines?

(GW): Yes, they had regulations – undergraduates could read only certain magazines, and graduate students had more selections. If certain professors were using magazines as references, we could read even more. They prevented access to young people, and that was a capitalist approach. I was a graduate student so I was able to see certain things others weren't, and then afterwards when I was a professor, I was able to read all the magazines I wanted.

(JD): Do you remember certain artists, or certain issues, or certain things that impressed you?

(GW): No, it was random. And in another sense, I was full of myself. I didn't want to remember anything too deeply because I wanted to have my own creations. Not like art historians at all: you do research and you have to remember artists, works, what is significant, what is important. For me, everything was more general, I didn't want to remember too much too deeply but just absorb to bring references out in my work. Absorption is my method.

(Q): Do you remember when the concept 'installation' was first used?

(GW): I was not totally clear; and I was not even that clear about what installation was. I saw images in magazines and felt that the work had more power. I didn't have the ability to read at the time and know that it said 'mixed media installation'. I only saw the visuals and liked what I saw. It was really, well, it's still, primitive, in a good way.

(JD): That's not unusual. Well, I know you had met Peter Selz before.

(GW): It was good fortune. First, American collector Jacobus, the Dean of the Medical School of Utah University at the time, who was interested in Chinese ink painting. He made a trip to China and met Peter Selz on the train, while he was on a tour with a translator who actually graduated from the Art History Department of Zhejiang Academy. And he brought Peter Selz to my studio, to show Peter what a vanguard artist in China was like.

(JD): So this Jacobus from Utah brought Peter Selz to your studio, or did the translator bring him?

(GW): Yes, the translator did. And he also gave lectures at my Academy, the Sichuan Academy and the Central Academy. On the train, Jacobus and Peter Selz were talking, and Jacobus said he wanted to see some good ink painting, and Peter Selz told Jacobus "This Wenda Gu guy you must see". So he came to my studio. And he committed to purchase a certain amount of work. Because of this, my first period in America was financially secure. Later, he passed away, and his widow was the diplomat in the China embassy, and -

(JD): They were Chinese or Western?

(GW): Both Western. She later donated some of the works to the Utah Museum. He was a very nice guy. My first Western collector! He has some early important works. Actually, one of the long scrolls that the widow put in the auction was the one you purchased. Other pieces he donated to the Utah museum. The widow still has some in her room.

(JD): Interesting. So when you arrived in the United States, a young man with great ambition, what was your impression? Were there certain things that shocked you?

(GW): Of course, the skyscrapers, for one. The shock remains later on. When I bring Westerners around to see China's buildings, they don't see them as anything new; no shock at all. Modern China now has so many skyscrapers. When I left China, it was dark, and there were no taxis. I didn't have any concept of these buildings when I first moved to America. I only had my self-confidence and ambition with me. It allowed me to bypass many difficulties.

(JD): I know, I know. But you continued to do very challenging work, including your menstrual blood pieces. When was that piece first shown in San Francisco?

(GW): Peter Selz was the curator for that show, and the exhibition was in '89.

(JD): When did that project start?

(GW): Well, I had toured to lecture at many universities. I had two ideas at the time. One, I wanted to depart from language, and two, I wanted to enter the material world. At the time, they talked about a great genetic discovery, which was going to change our understanding of humankind. So I wanted my work to represent biological material.

(JD): So that's how you got the title 'Biological Millennium'?

(GW): Yes, but for the work, I didn't, well, I wasn't really aware of the American cultural context –

(JD): Religious context and the abortion debate?

(GW): My piece was much more controversial than a female using her own blood because of the power and gender issues I raised. And as a Chinese-foreigner, I was supposed to represent China, not American culture and controversy. I wasn't aware of this; it was all just instinctual because I thought it was a powerful statement about biological success. For the piece, I had sixty women who made their statements for me. It was more powerful than just blood. I thought through the delivery of the work. I wanted depth and philosophy. It wasn't about feminism at all. If a woman continued to have babies non-stop, she wouldn't have blood. The blood is part of the death process. You don't need sperm or anything. It's a type of death. I focused on this philosophy. It wasn't related to those many American issues. It was only later I was informed about how this work affected the American people. It became a way for me to understand American culture. As a young boy, when I first came to America, I thought, 'China has all these regulations, and America is a dream land, a free land'. But I didn't know every country had its own type of openness as well as its political social concerns. I didn't know, because I really thought America was totally free, and I was so wild and thought America was a place where I could be totally wild.

(JD): It's probably the most challenging work you've made.

(GW): Yes. If I were an American-born-white artist, I think this piece could be a part of American art history. This work was really important at the time.

(JD): Can I ask a question about specifics: do you have reference material about this installation? Was there a catalogue? If there was one, I've never seen it.

(GW): Yes, the final work I showed was in the commercial gallery. This work could not show alone in an American institution. They gave me many reasons why it couldn't. The work blocked my career for a long period of time; curators saw it as too harmful, too dangerous. Even Roberta Smith wrote in the NY Times that this show would be my last. In my commercial gallery later on, she then said 'It's not that using menstrual blood will prevent an artist from being a good artist, but that this is Wenda Gu's artwork.' She provided both perspectives. I had a simple catalogue that Peter Selz wrote an article for, for the first show. I don't have this pamphlet anymore. And also a student of Peter Selz's wrote an article. Then later, Eleanor Heartney and I made a pamphlet and I still have that one. She wrote a short article and refers to the feminists and other controversial issues that arose during that time. The last show was in '96, at a commercial gallery in Soho. That's it, and Johnson put it in that show [the post '89 show in Hong Kong] because it was a China contemporary show so the American controversial concerns weren't as present. The piece wasn't about American society.

(JD): It's very interesting because in my mind, I think that it could've been your most important work.

(GW): Yes, but this work caused so much trouble.

(JD): But I think it's a fascinating work because when it was shown in HK, nobody even paid any attention to it. I'm not saying that was a bad thing, but it didn't create the same controversy.

(GW): Yes, because a lot of Chinese don't have these same issues – if I showed the work in China, they wouldn't view it as artwork, and there wouldn't be a societal issue. Everything is contextual. America has all these issues, so it makes sense. Abortion, death of children, this all makes sense. But it isn't, or wasn't an issue in China.

(JD): It's like Chinese medicine.

(GW): Chinese culture has its own scenarios but they are quite different from those in America. This work was in the Sydney Contemporary Art Museum, a museum with several semi-governmental trustees. I think several companies withdrew their sponsorship for a year because of this piece. A senator was also involved when the work was in the Vancouver Art Museum, as they compared it to Andres Serrano's Jesus Christ [Piss Christ]. The audience fought hard; I had so many comments from the audience. Both hate and love, it was totally crazy. It really provided me with an understanding of culture. Before that I was really naïve.

(JD): At some point, I'd love to come again and collect as much documentation about that work.

(GW): There are a lot of articles.

(JD): Yes, but do you have installation photographs, or drafts of pamphlets for the exhibition?

(GW): I have copies of the pamphlets – I definitely have the later one made with Eleanor, but the earlier one with Peter Selz and Catherine Cook...I think I have a copy but not the original.

(JD): Because we don't have them at the archive. We just need copies, not the originals.

(GW): It's amazing when I think back to the project. I had sixty women send to me through the post – usually you're not supposed to send this biological material – their blood and they also created and painted all kinds of things on the absorbent paper. I still have some, but not all.

(JD): Do you still have the other materials for the installation?

(GW): I have about half of them still saved. When Johnson wanted to bring this work to Australia, the Australians were very specific about their check-up. The officials found a doctor to see whether it was real or fake blood, as a certificate had to be attained to pass their quarantine. It was so funny, and it was really terrible. I don't even know why I had the guts to do this kind of work. (Laughter) When I was in Minnesota as a foreign scholar and when I described my wanting to do this work, all the professors said 'You're totally crazy, no one is going to send anything to you'. And then after one year of touring schools to give lectures, I received so many samples.

(JD): It's amazing. It's a truly incredible work. That work I think needs to be documented.

(GW): Yes. I wanted to make a book called the 'Enigma of Blood'. So many things could surface from it. But it's still not acceptable in many societies, to do this kind of work, maybe in China someday. There was a documentary film that received an award, a Toronto film company starring Judy Chicago and the end of the film they showed my work. There is a menstrual blood museum somewhere too...the film was called 'Under the Cover'. You can search their website. I have a copy of the video.

(JD): Maybe we can have it transferred to a DVD or something.

(GW): Yes. The piece was filmed at the last show I did at the Soho gallery in '96.

(JD): Well, what I will do is come back to this at another point.

(GW): The video you can probably buy. A team of two Canadian women made it, and I think it's a beautiful film.

(Q): How did you solicit people from other countries –

(GW): Most of the people I didn't know. I described my project proposal at the end of each of my lectures, and asked for participation. I wanted a statement to come with the biological material. It could be a poem or prose or political criticism...the participants all had different backgrounds. They sent me their different writings, and they were very interesting. Peter Selz talked about it, and he wrote about the reaction he had when his daughter first had menstrual blood. All kinds were sent; it was very intriguing. The first show of the work took place in San Francisco, at a commercial gallery. The audience came and they all stood against the walls. No one wanted to come too close to the work; they looked so intensely but from a distance, and they were too embarrassed to get too close. I just documented all the work. It wasn't aesthetically or beautifully executed. The last show was made to be more beautiful, with white blankets and metal beds, and I put all the copies of criticism and media into glass frames, as bed sheets. It was beautifully done. It took time though; from '89 to '96. The final work was really beautiful. I also bought many copies of King's Bible, and I dug a hole in them and dug to the page of Eve in Eden. And I put the tampon in it, so - the thing is, I didn't know how dangerous the work was. Religion is the most dangerous thing to play with – same as Xu Bing's [徐冰] book - the bible as porn – I think this work was more powerful than the other book, but this work was almost too dangerous to show. Later I discovered how daring I was. It's sort of like what the Chinese say: the young cow doesn't know how dangerous tigers are, and thinks they're fun, without realizing they eat cow. In retrospect, I think 'How could I have done this work!'. I don't believe I made it myself either.

(JD): One of the questions I want to ask is, if there was one book or one essay that you remember the most from that period, what would it be? That you read?

(GW): I can only give you a Chinese name, but Nietzsche's autobiography, the Chinese translation was 'Qiao! zhe ge ren' [瞧! 這個人], and the cover was an image of Jesus Christ. I think he talked about himself as a new, contemporary liberated Jesus. He ended classical philosophy, and began modern philosophy. And this was the most influential for me. And later of course, looking back, certain writers like Wittgenstein, his notes on logic, were quite influential to my art. The physical aspect to my work I learned from Darwinism. His readings gave me such power, and I think they make up the core of human existence. It's so practical too, only the English could've thought this up, not the French or Italians. The French have the Enlightenment, the Italians, the Renaissance. Darwinism captured human existence. A power game, the stronger survives better. The physical side of influences came from Darwin and Freud. Freud is a semi-scientist. And Nietzsche was totally against science. And Darwin was in the middle. They gave me greater structure. I have a theory about why only English colonies still exist. Other colonies have disappeared. The English succeeded because of Darwinism, that's my theory. I think the physicality in my work comes from this Darwinism. And Nietzsche gave me the spiritual and theoretical power of the physical. So the work, even my latest works, where I'm using 3D animation, with a park model and 3D works, is all influenced by Darwin.

(JD): Where is that work going to be?

(GW): In Shanghai at the Overseas Chinese Corp. Zhang Huan [张洵] organized it. And next year, this kind of work will be interesting to incorporate with government parks, and low density, high quality development.

(JD): So it's going to be quasi-permanent?

(GW): Yes. My idea works for a four square-kilometer space. It's not just a Suzhou garden. This is my ambition. Yesterday I was at Asia Society and was looking at the calligraphy garden, which was quite beautiful. The lanterns are up, I just realized, in Brussels. It's become the most popular work of fifty cultural projects. It's at the city center.

(JD): This sense of ambition, the sense of size and scale, again it's going back to the issue of physicality. The sense of impact has always been in your work from the very beginning.

(GW): I think this time I consider it my third period, in conjunction with Chinese elements and pop culture. The forest calligraphy became a popular public event. The lantern thing too, so I'm currently discussing with Rotterdam and the San Paolo Biennale committee to build a project next year.

(JD): That's interesting because again, the themes have been there since the beginning; creating those kinds of disjunctions.

(Q): I'm curious, once you left China, did you look back? Was there any relationship with China that you –

(GW): Yes, yes, it was always there. It depends on China, as the world's attention... Since leaving, I didn't pay too much attention at the beginning. Gradually I became more and more in tune. Also, it's kind of physical - later on China had certain developments. The environment was open to more kinds of work, and for lower costs too, so I produced work in Shanghai, for practical reasons. And then more and more, Chinese mainland artists became noticed, and I wanted more involvement. When I left China, scholars said it was a real pity because I could have reestablished or modernized Chinese art, so they saw my leaving as a bad decision. And actually, from the beginning to middle of the 90s, I tried to regroup. I still believe my very late stage will be pure ink painting. I have an illusion that later one; the final works that will stand strong are my ink paintings.

(JD): But you did participate in the 1989 show?

(GW): Yes, I participated in that show.

(JD): Did you go?

(GW): No I didn't go. I didn't have physical work, because the tapestry for the Lausanne show was one that Gao Minglu wanted. And because I wasn't there – actually, there was quite a bit of competition – other artists didn't want this work loaned to Gao Minglu so it turned out to be a photography show instead. I had a photograph of that piece.

(JD): But you had another piece in that show no?

(GW): No physical piece. In the brochure, a photo of the work exists. Gao Minglu was not able to get this work.

(JD): But wasn't there an alternative piece to that one in the show?

(GW): In my mind, I don't think so. That was really a comic show. Everyone tried to 'grab' something. It's interesting. And the fascinating story still goes on, with Xiao Lu.

(JD): The saga continues, that's for sure. If I may ask, where were you when Tiananmen happened?

(GW): I was in a protest here in New York. Next to me was Chen Kaige [陈凯歌], the Chinese film director. So I was here. We went around Chinatown to protest. I was not in China.

(JD): Do you remember seeing it on TV?

(GW): Yes.

(JD): And the Chinese community came out here –

(GW): I didn't have any idea of who was right or wrong – there are so many theories about this. I was totally against it, and then later on I had other thoughts, because it's a very complicated issue. With all the politics, and not being there, I really don't know the real story behind it. But I was not happy about the end of these student leaders. They aren't doing so good.

(JD): The internal politics among the students of that time was complicated as well.

(GW): They didn't have a clear idea too, just like my work in the '80s. Very rough and primitive.

(JD): But the government still shouldn't have done what they did.

(GW): The government was naïve too. They panicked. If they weren't so naïve, it wouldn't have happened. It's really crazy. It's the result of China not having a proper system for anything. And the students don't have legal sense. So I don't know...

(JD): But you did engage at that time. Were you aware of the other communities of Chinese artists in New York at that time? Did you have conversations with them? Who were your friends?

(GW): That time Lin Lin [林琳] was still alive.

(JD): Oh, he was at Hangzhou with you – did you know him from Zhejiang Academy?

(GW): Yes, he had partially graduated, only partially because he walked out with me. He was rebellious too. Some people in the protest weren't really for the protest. I was truly there for the protest. Some people went because they wanted a green card. I wasn't aware of this at the time, but they took photos, including Lin Lin, of the immigration officer who was shot. 'We cannot go back to China because it's like this, it's dangerous, so give me a green card!' It was strange.

(JD): But were you aware of the artists on the sidewalks doing portraits and things?

(GW): Yes yes, I don't remember all the details, because it was a chaotic moment, we walked two, three hours. I also participated in the protest against the Iraq war. We all marched to the United Nations. I was in a kind of a training place for artists, but it was really poor. The bathroom was dirtier than those in China. Now things are luxurious. Maybe I'll have a funny autobiography. There were so many experiences. You know, I had no bank account; the second year in New York, I thought I had to have a bank account, so I bought a suit jacket, and tried to get a bank account – my first account at age 33, 34. In China, I lived for 32 years without a bank account. Education was free, and living was free too. I just needed pocket money to buy food. That's why in lectures, I always tell people I have these extremes, starting with a Marxist, idealist attitude to a capitalist New York attitude. The past is so vivid. (Laughter)

(JD): But, you made the transition very well.

(GW): I remember when I was five, my grandmother brought me to the bus station and bought one tea egg, and told me 'Don't tell your brother or sister, they will want an egg too'. Then over Halloween I was in Williamsburg and kids threw eggs at me. That same egg...with an entirely different story. An egg doesn't mean anything here now. In China, an egg was a luxury.

(JD): I think there are very few places in the world where situational extremes happen in such a short lifetime. Not from the time you were a baby to the time you turn 90, but only in half that time.

(GW): Crazy things happen. Also, none of my children are from my marriage; one is adopted, and one is from a friend. There are all sorts of stories. This life is wild. Anyway. A biography would be interesting when I can find time to write about my life.

(JD): When you slow down. I don't think you're going to slow down. Don't slow down for a while, keep doing your work!

(GW): My father is 92 and still very clear minded. My mother is 87. My father was Hong Yifa's student, who still writes poems and does calligraphy. My mother's grandfather was governor of Tibet; the Qing Emperor sent him to control Tibet. I think I have a little bit of Tibetan blood.

(JD): Interesting. Well, you've obviously had a very interesting introduction to America and to America in the late '80s. We are so glad to have had the opportunity to speak to you. We will be back! Thank you.