

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SHEN KUIYI

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise, Phoebe Wong **Date:** 23 Jul 2007 **Duration:** about 1 hour **Location:** Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong

Shen Kuiyi (SK): I had two roles at that time; I read a lot of books, but I was also an editor of books.

During the Cultural Revolution, I went to the countryside. Then, in 1975, I went to Shanghai Normal University to study fine art. I graduated in 1978, and went on to work in the Shanghai Agricultural Exhibition Center as their curator for two years, and then in the 1980s, I changed jobs and worked at the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House [上海人民美術出版社].

I was an editor, and at the beginning of my time there (around 1980) up until 1984, for four years, we worked on publishing Western art-related books. So, I am familiar with lots of books on this list because I focused a lot of time on Western art, and in college I studied oil painting. I also did some translations at that time, from English to Chinese, and from Japanese to Chinese. I decided to learn Japanese on my own, and went to evening school to learn Japanese as well. At the end of the 1970s in China, how people have access to these books I think is an interesting question to ask. I wrote a little section in the book about the Zhou Brothers, about two Chinese artists who now live in Chicago. They studied at the Shanghai Drama Institute [上海戲劇學院] in 1978-79, and I wrote for their catalogue for an exhibition they had in Chicago. I talked a little bit about their upbringing, because they are originally from Guangxi - Zhuang minority artists - and I was interested in how they were influenced by Shanghai.

In 1978-79, there were several major international book fairs held in China. There was one very important book fair, in 1978-80, and there were so many Japanese art publishers at that time publishing huge series on Western art. At that time too China just opened up to Japan and the rest of the world; everything about Western art, culture, politics...everything was infiltrating China. This book fair presented many art publications -

Jane DeBevoise (JD): Zheng Shengtian remembers these book fairs as well, and says that he was sent with two other people to Beijing and worked around the clock to pick books from lists, and worked and worked and worked to the point where one of them upon returning to Hangzhou, passed away. This book fair was extremely important, and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (ZAFA) bought a lot of them, which is why they had such a good library. Are you talking about the book fairs in Beijing or Shanghai?

(SK): Both Beijing and Shanghai. These book fairs were always held twice. Shanghai reaped the benefits; first the fairs opened in Beijing, and then they moved to Shanghai. Books would be shipped to Shanghai for the fairs - but no one wanted to have to deal with sending the books back, and they really just wanted to get rid of all the books, so Shanghai got to keep all the books after the book fairs. Some of the major institutions would use this opportunity to buy books too; when I was in Shanghai at that time, the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House bought the most, as did the Shanghai Drama Institute, and the Shanghai Artists Association. Most of the books in Shanghai were divided between these three places. Of course, ZAFA - Zheng Shengtian - also bought a lot of books. All the books were left in China, and most in Shanghai. This was important for anyone in the arts, but this next point is quite interesting. These book fairs were not made accessible to everyone; you had to have a special ticket, and typically only those with a professional degree could go, like those affiliated

with the universities, academies, artists associations, theatre companies, and the sort. If affiliated, you could receive a discount. Art students had some access too; from morning to night, when they were getting ready to close, I remember, the room would still be completely packed with people standing, sitting on the floors... every minute just reading, copying books – few people had cameras at that time – people were drawing, reading, hand-copying books... There were three book fairs, one at the Shanghai Friendship Hall and two others at foreign bookstore, the Foreign Bookstore on Fuzhou Road. The 3rd and 4th floors were dedicated to book fairs. So, these book fairs played a very important role, not only during the period of the fair, but also even after they were over. The books stayed and went to the three main institutions, and people read a lot. Before I went to work for the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, I went to the Artists Association to read all the books I could. I started reading art books, and I took notes.

I should point out that the books on your list here are not really about art. But they were so important. At the end of the '70s, beginning of the '80s, all these books were translated into Chinese. We had four editors work on what we called 'Foreign Art'.

(JD): Were you one of the four?

(SK): Yes, and Liu Ruli's [劉汝禮] son, Liu Ruli was from Nanjing in the 1980s. And then his son Liu Mingyi also went to ZAHA. I was the youngest of the four editors. But Liu Ruli's son and I were the only ones translating texts, the others only edited. That's why there were not as many texts associated with the books with images, and why they were called *Tu Pian* [圖片, Pictures], and *Hua Ce* [畫冊, Picture Books] which meant few texts were involved.

(JD): One issue that comes up over and over again is the issue of translation; the way that various materials entered into China, particularly the philosophical texts about Western thinking, through translation. Many people have told us that we should develop a list of who the translators were at the time, where they were coming from, their backgrounds, and perhaps at some point, we should get some hold of those translations. From the meetings and interviews we've already conducted, everyone seems to say that the translations that were done in the late-70s, early-80s were much better in some ways, and generally of a very high standard, than those of today. It sounds like a very interesting topic, a great paper, and it would be great to have copies of some of those first books.

(SK): That is very important actually. Let me follow up. In the 1980s, a very popular, important series, not on your list was *Western Philosophy Series* [西方哲學譯叢], that is, a series of Western philosophical translations. That was really influential at the time; there was a black cover on it, and few books had a black cover! The whole series was in black and was published by Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing Group [上海文藝出版社].

There were twenty-something books in the series. I should mention that this series was really influential. They were carefully chosen philosophical texts, of texts from different periods in the Western world, including more up-to-date, contemporary works. Existentialism, Sartre, Freud...they were all very fashionable at the time. Later, lots of translation series followed this model – the reason why this one is so good is because Shanghai Translation Publishing House [上海譯文出版社] was very professional and most of their translators were professors at Shanghai International Studies University [上海外國語大學] and other places. Some were old, retired professors, but very good, and learned to translate in the 1940s when they were students, when they were young. Their translations, the early translations were, like you said, better than the later ones, because now editors rely on authors to do most of the work, and the editing. But back then, there was a serious, sentence-to-sentence system of editing, and it wasn't fast, but it was good, so it took a long time to publish just one book. Publishing nine books per year per editor was already considered to be a lot of work. Now, hundreds of books are published per year per editor! Thorough checks would be made, and if something was not acceptable, it would be returned to the authors for revisions, and then sent back for another editing proof. The quality was much better back then than it is now.

This series, *Western Philosophy Series* [西方哲學譯叢], came out in 1984-85, and at that time, in the intellectual circle, everyone was talking about it. 'Have you read this book, have you read that book?' It took a long time to publish; we started in the 1980s and it wasn't until 1984 did the whole book finally come out. You can ask artists at that time, the New Wave, avant-garde artists of the 1986-87 period, and most of them would likely have read a lot of philosophical texts, because at that time we still didn't have serious Western art books on art or art theory; there were only a few that were translated, like the book *A Concise History of Modern Painting* by the British author Herbert Read, or something, I think it is the one Huang Yongping put in the washing machine. And there were a few other books, by Shanghai's He Jianzhi and De Dingyu; they published a couple books during the mid-80s. But really, there were not that many at that time.

(JD): Specifically on Western art history you mean.

(SK): Yes. Generally, I would say 1987-88 was a time for publications on Western art. From 1985-1986, I was sent to Japan for over a year to work for Kodansha [Publishing House], so of course at that time, besides the two magazines you already know about, the two journals with translations, *World Art* [世界美術], from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and *Art In Translations* [美術譯叢], from Hangzhou, there wasn't much else. These two journals were important because they had some really good articles in them.

At that time, Shao Dazhen was chief-editor of *World Art* at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and Yang Chengying was in charge of *Art in Translations* from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (ZAFA). In the mid-1980s, most of the translations were not about modern art, but about pre-modern Western art; actually, I published articles in both magazines, about 17th and 18th century art. This was the first priority of these magazines. Even Shanghai People Publishing House and Beijing People Publishing House, these two publishing houses, had strong editorial teams. We had about thirty-five editors working on art, and in Beijing they had about thirty. So we had large teams. But it seems the books were still about providing an introduction to Western art to people so focusing on modern art was of little priority. There was also a lot written on Chinese art, which was very important. Like *China Art Collection* [中國美術全集], that series of sixty volumes, started in the early 1980s, and finally one of the sixty books was finished in 1984, on Dunhuang. Chinese art history was also very important and a priority for the nation.

Then, in 1985-86, I was not in China. At the end of '86, I returned and I was so amazed by the phenomenon in the Chinese art world. Before I went to Japan, I did not feel that modern art was something people paid much attention to – the phenomenon had not started yet; when I returned, I went to Hangzhou maybe once or twice a month, and it was very different, and there was a complete change; there was a sense of urgency. As an editor, I had a chance to see real Western art in Tokyo, Japan. There were so many modern Western art exhibitions there. So I was shocked to see how much was being misinterpreted in China. That time, a friend of mine in Zhejiang, Fan Jingzhong, during the 1985-86 period, started to become very interested in avant-garde art, and he was actually the first to make Gu Wenda known. He was the first to start doing translations of that period. The study of iconography became of interest to him. At first, his interest was in Chinese art, as that was his background focus, but he became interested in iconography, and was at that time also chief editor of *Art in Translations* at ZAFA. At the time he didn't have the chance or time to publish his personal series of translations [on iconography].

(JD): So, he had begun translating [Heinrich] Wölfflin and [Erwin] Panofsky, before his [Ernst] Gombrich project?

(SK): Yes. The first serious translation of Panofsky took place when I just returned to China in 1986, which was very interesting. We spoke a lot about it. Fan was the chief editor for *Art in Translations* and *New Art* [新美術] at that time, and he was the Editorial Director of the school newspaper, the director of the editorial department for both journals. We talked quite a lot and agreed that we needed serious translations about the modern Western art field, to provide more 'real' information to the Chinese art world, to the critics and to the Chinese artists.

A lot of things have already happened in the west. The result was the beginning of several translation series, organized by different publishers; one came through the Sichuan Art Publishing House [四川美術出版社]; then Shao Dazhen was asked to be the editor of the translation series called *Western Art Theory translation series* [西方美術理論譯叢] or something like that. But they only published two books; back at the publishing house, I started editing a translation series called *20th Century Western Art Theory* [二十世紀西方美術理論譯叢], which ended up as a twelve volume series. This series was initiated at the end of 1986, and the first came out in 1987, because there was a political movement and campaign called the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism, which took place at the end of 1986, right when this series was initiated. We had a meeting, and they asked me to write self-criticism to explain why I wanted to write a book on Western modern art.

(JD): How did you respond to that?

(SK): Actually, I refused to say anything, and they were shocked. Usually, everyone is supposed to say something, but I just refused. At the time, I was head of the editorial department, and one of the party secretaries said to me 'Why don't you say something like, we don't have many things on Bourgeois Liberalism in our series and that this series can prove it...' I was required to have substance for my bureau report, but I refused. They didn't pressure me too much, but they did cut the preface I wrote for the translation series. So there is no preface. I did not describe the 'good reason' for why this series had to be published. *Artistic Freedom* [美術自由] was published by fourteen publishers; And I wrote an introduction for this as well, which was also cut. It doesn't matter though, because the series was published.

Besides this, Sichuan published two volumes, but I'm not sure why they were unable to publish the whole series; maybe they received the same or more pressure from the campaign or maybe it was financial. Other books on art, like one of Wolfflin's art history books were published by Liaoning Art Publishing House [遼寧美術出版社]. Lingnan Art Publishing House [嶺南美術出版社] in Guangzhou also published some. And then there were a couple in Henan. They called them series, but actually only one book came out. The only true series that came out was the series from Shanghai, our twelve-volume series.

Now, about translations, about how they were chosen and organized – because I was the chief editor, and because we had an extensive library at our publishing house, we used our library to find everything we could that was of importance at that time. We started off with quite a long list, and then finally decided what we really wanted to include. We also tried to choose more recently published books, so we published the 1984-86 books on *Modernism and Modern Art* (first edited by Francis Francina and Charles Harrison) and *Modernism, Criticism and Realism*, which was a very theoretical book, by Charles Harrison. And, also Shock of the New, whose first edition just came out at that time. That was a big hit when it was first published. It's beautiful and interesting, and there was a TV series about it as well. And, we also included some Japanese authors who wrote a book on *Visual Psychology* and texts on Kandinsky, translated by Luo Shiping. At the Central Academy of Fine Arts, I stayed with Luo Shiping and Li Weiping Mao Juyuan, in Luo Shiping's room. I shared a bed with Mao Juyuan and Luo Shiping and Li Weiping had the other one. It was quite funny.

(JD): Did you and your institution translate entire books? Cover to cover?

(SK): Yes, the whole book. Twelve books were not selections, but whole books.

(JD): You didn't get copyright, did you?

(SK): Fortunately, we didn't have copyright back then, because China didn't join yet. So, we just chose books we liked and published them.

(JD): Did you even think about it?

(SK): Yes, of course. At that time we already had a relationship with Taiwan and I worked in Japan, and we dealt with copyright issues all the time; to pay royalties to those involved, and everything else. But at that time, for

translations in China, we asked for help from the Publishing Bureau in Shanghai, because supposedly, they were in-charge. The bureau told us that we have copyrights but we haven't joined the international copyright so you could do whatever we wanted. So we asked translators to help with our series, and professors from Shanghai International Studies University and Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade [上海對外貿易學院], and other foreign language and trade schools, helped us.

Phoebe Wong (PW): You mentioned Kandinsky earlier. Did you translate English versions or German versions of Kandinsky texts?

(SK): English versions. All but one was translated via their English versions. One was translated from its Japanese version by Xu Ping, who at the time was director of the Nanjing Arts Institute, and he studied in Japan so I asked him to translate it into Chinese. That one was the book called *Visual Psychology*. It was hard at that time to find translators for books in other languages. English translators were easier to find. Professors were young and old. Other university academics were involved too, with some from Shanghai Normal University and East China Normal University others, but the majority was from the two institutions I mentioned earlier. They were all very serious; some translated very fast, others very slow, and that's why this series that started in 1987 was not completely published until 1992; at that point I had already left China. Fortunately, they kept it up through the '80s, because as you know, in 1989, things stopped for a while, and it wasn't until 1991 when they resumed work, and finally completed the series; I can give you a complete list of the books translated later.

(PW): Do you remember how many copies were made? What was the print-run?

(SK): We decided to start with 3,000 copies, with a few volumes printed many, many times. For example, for *Shock of the New*, we reprinted it several times because even after our print-run in 1992, it was sold out again. It was very popular.

The series ended with 12,000 copies published. The readership is still considered small though. At that time, besides these translation series, there were several other series. We had one on Western art history, with Liu Mingyi as editor – we decided to publish a series on the art history of America, Japan, Germany, France... and a world art-type series. We decided to have these two – mine was on art theory – and they were being worked on simultaneously. Besides that, we had lots of pictures [畫片] published as well, like *Art Appreciation* [美術欣賞], with more pictures and very short texts. We also had *Fine Arts series* [美術叢刊], and I should give some credit to this magazine because it was very important and influential for artists. In the early '80s, artists would always mention this publication. The editor of *Fine Arts series* was Ren Manxin, and he was an eccentric person but really good editor, and very sharp. He traveled quite a lot in China and discovered a lot of new artists throughout, who were eventually published in the magazine. He was also one of the first to introduce China to modern Western art. Even though the articles in the magazine were short, with little theory, it was a great introduction visually, especially for works by Picasso and Matisse, which was still very new to the artists in China at that time.

So *Fine Arts series* and these two series of books were very influential. Before that, Beijing People's Publishing House also published quite a lot of art books, but they never really put them together to form a series, so people didn't really get the information they wanted from them in a collective way.

(JD): So it wasn't as systematic.

(SK): Yes.

(JD): Can I ask about your distribution in Shanghai versus Beijing's distribution? How did they differ, and did the books they published get to different audiences?

(SK): Actually, they were all distributed by Xinhua Book Store, and they were still the single distributor for China at the time. There was a division made, so Beijing People's Publishing House was mainly distributed to northern

parts of China and ours was distributed to southern parts of China. So at that time, these two publishers were publishing most of the art books, and China was divided into two territories.

(PW): Did they ever reject any distribution?

(SK): No. We always put together a plan-proposal before any major editing, and discussed a lot with our department and distribution departments. We had a huge meeting with all these people and invited the officials from Xinhua Bookstore to come make decisions on many aspects of the publications, and they represented 'the readers', and were also the ones to decide how many copies would be made. So sometimes we would argue about the number of copies; they said the translation series wouldn't be received well, so 2,000 was enough, but we asked for 3,000 and turns out readers wanted more. Copiers said printing 2,000 to 3,000 would be the same price; it would just be an issue of buying more paper.

(JD): Who decided the cost of the books to the customer?

(SK): Our publishers decided this; our distribution and printing departments. At that time, the book costs were really low. Printing, selection of paper and royalties to our translators were things that the editors would think about. Actually, come to think of it, they never counted the editor's labor costs! We were "national staff" [國家職工] so we (the editors) had a salary, and didn't get any royalties. Making a publication was quite cheap in those days.

(PW): Were there subsidies as well?

(SK): Yes. Before 1984, all the publishers were considered "business unit" [事業單位], which meant they were state, government-owned, and non-profit businesses. Profit was not our concern. Because we belonged to the Shanghai Municipal Government, we were 'run' by the Publishing Bureau, as well as the Propaganda Department of the Communist party. So the whole publishing industry was considered propaganda.

(JD): It's still that way isn't it?

(SK): Yes, it is still that way. They still control the publishing houses in China. Because it was in part 'propaganda', money was not an issue. They did request we publish a 'good book'. But things changed a little in 1984; we had to take part-financial responsibility, and we also had to give money to the Municipal Government based on the benefits we earned. At that time we started making a lot of money.

(JD): Based on what we've heard, it seems people started to become a little concerned about this requirement because they always had to give money back to the central organization and could not retain the money, or enough money at least to fund their operations or expand.

(SK): In 1984, it was still okay; you weren't giving too much to the government. That was the term of agreement; if you profit, you give part to the government. So in the mid-1980s we started considering whether the books we published would earn money or not. They argued our series wouldn't earn money, so we couldn't publish more than 3,000 the first time.