

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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### ZHANG HONGNIAN

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise

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**Jane DeBevoise (JD):** And this painting was in one of the big national exhibitions at that time.

**Zhang Hongnian (ZH):** Yes they always came out with a big show, like 20th Century Oil Paintings or something like that, to show to people.

**(JD):** [Pointing to a reproduction in a book of *We Were Young Then*, 1980] So this painting describes what situation? Where were you? Who were these people?

**(ZH):** And that's me, there. The story is even more interesting if you hear that I went back to the same place, we spent about 4 years there and after we were already back in Beijing and I already had my success in art, I decided to go back. But I couldn't find the same place anymore. And later when I saw the yellow earth, I decided, ok, that's the place. So then I started crying. Because I said see, not even 10 years later, and everything is gone. Nobody cares what happened to these people and my old generation, the young, their beautiful art, so I needed to do a painting.

**(JD):** And this would have taken place where? Where was this?

**(ZH):** It's called Yu Xian. Yu Xian is a little county in Hebei province.

**(JD):** So you as students were sent out to this area.

**(ZH):** We were art students at that time. And everybody here knows about reeducation. So we were here to do hard labor. As the Americans would say, we were to get brainwashed.

**(JD):** So you were doing hard labor with your classmates at that point in time. And you stayed there for how long?

**(ZH):** For four years.

**(JD):** Four years. And so this is a memory. This is interesting. This is a memory of you remembering that period. And you lived all together in a dormitory?

**(ZH):** It's all made from mud. We had the wood frame for the windows and the roof. That's why after we left and the farmers went to take off the wood parts to burn and we saw that house, what we called the house, had turned into the earth again.

**(JD):** It sort of melted into the earth. How interesting. So this is your memory of going back there ten years later?

**(ZH):** Ten years later. Actually I show life. Because when people see how crowded it was, they don't believe people were actually living there together. Actually the room was no bigger than this section [gestures a space in the room]. Ten people living here.

**(JD):** Oh my gosh. So you got to know each other very well.

**(ZH):** We were very close. Very close. Very good friends.

**(JD):** Oh how amazing. And have you stayed in contact with these people?

**(ZH):** Yes. Some of them you know, like here I use Skype to call them.

**(JD):** [Points to the painting.] So this is Ai Xuan eating.

**(ZH):** Yes, this is Ai Xuan.

**(JD):** And this is someone reading. Reading a letter.

**(ZH):** Yes, another friend. They all, everybody can find themselves...I almost look at people's eyes, saying 'Why? What happened?' [Turns page.] That's a detail.

**(JD):** Beautifully painted. And this one was collected by the National Gallery in Beijing?

**(ZH):** Yes, the National Gallery...This painting actually is very typical of that period because you remember I said that I kind of created the style called stream-of-consciousness. See here, the title is On the Train of Destiny. Because our life by that time was basically ruthless, we had no home, we had no future, so our life is like the train taking us everywhere we don't know. Sometime you might meet a girl on the train and you may want to talk but you're too shy. And then the train stops at your destiny and you walk down to the no-named little train station and you look back and the train takes the girl to her destiny. It's not clear. That whole time at the end of the Cultural Revolution, we felt that. So I just wanted to capture the sense of fading after that.

[Pointing to another painting.] Also I divided into another style, what I call folk songs. In China, we have those old songs that are kind of free, not exactly the same space, kind of talks about little symbols like those little whirls with the peach. I was too busy to be an avant-garde artist by that time.

**(JD):** So this would've been a big change.

**(ZH):** [Flips between paintings.] Yes. Look at this, and then look at that one. So actually, in all my career, I basically kept the realism style, but the truth is, I was a part of the avant-garde. I was doing very strange, brave things.

**(JD):** ... rather than a reproduction. Can you tell us a little bit, on film, about the painting behind us?

**(ZH):** Yes. [Walks towards a wall hanging of Before the Long March]. I'll stand here so you can see the proportion. You see, this all uses the knife. You see, even the faces.

**(JD):** Can you tell us how you came up with this idea? What was it for? What was the occasion?

**(ZH):** At first, I was kind of very romantically into that revolutionary idea. In 1976, China's last 3 most important leaders died: Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De, so it was a shock. You know, to be under that kind of leadership for so long, we suddenly felt like we lost our soul. So that's why, as an artist, I felt like I didn't do enough for Mao. During the Cultural Revolution, we were in the countryside. That's the only painting I did, actually, for what I respected in Mao as a great revolutionary leader. Especially with Zhou Enlai, personally we loved him. That's why the painting shows the feeling that we really needed to continue what they started with the revolution. But now that it's been over for 30 years, I don't know if people still have this same revolutionary feeling. But what I still believe is, you know, China, we need to have that kind of spirit. For me it's a heroic spirit.

**(JD):** And so what is this painting about?

**(ZH):** This is in the period before the Long March, when the Japanese invaded China, and also the civil war of that period. I think the Red Army had already lost the battle. So they needed to change their location. They needed to go to the North to fight with the Japanese. So this is the moment when they leave Jinggangshan and say goodbye to people. So basically it's goodbye, leave the Red Flag for continuing the Revolution, that's the idea.

**(JD):** Your palette, your choice of colors is very beautiful. It's very soft, very pastel. Where did that come from? How did you learn that?

**(ZH):** I believe what you mention is the influence of Russian Art. You can see this kind of heroic style. But this

one, especially the red and black, like Chairman Mao's clothes and the red, that is almost for me the tone for revolution, the black showing the heaviness and the red showing the courage. So the red color supports those colors.

**(JD):** But I think your own personal style that I see is, there's a softness to it. The use of color is different than other artists of your generation in some way. There are some peach tones at the top and the light blue, and the mauve tones. And the way that you apply the paint is different. It suits your own personal vocabulary.

**(ZH):** Maybe because I believe in this kind of sensitive and romantic gentleness, which matched those kinds of colors. In me, I think I combine both. In another way, I think I am heroic and wanted to show the importance of courage and the revolutionary spirit. That's why I use a lot of knives, to show the rocky looking textures. Also combined with what you named, those gentle colors. So for me it's like ying and yang, combining them together.

**(JD):** That's very interesting. Was there a particular location that you were thinking about?

**(ZH):** No, actually, you can call it Ruijin, or Jiangxi Red Army, but all those buildings are definitely in this kind of style, which I kind of combined, because the whole composition goes more to what I call symbolism. You know, not exactly talking about the historical moment, just using it as a stage to show that kind of feeling, the feeling I wanted to show from my heart.

**(JD):** Now did you paint this for a special occasion? For a special exhibition?

**(ZH):** No, I think I had wanted to do one painting for so many years. Under their leadership, I gave them my respect for that. What happened was that this year there was a show in the National Museum, a memorial of the leaders.

**(JD):** And were you in the Central Academy at the time when you painted this painting?

**(ZH):** No, I was in the Beijing Art Academy. Beijing Hua Yuan. And that's the time I was with professional artists, because painting was my job.

**(JD):** So you had access to such a big canvas and all these paints.

**(ZH):** I had everything free.

**(JD):** And studio space

**(ZH):** Yes, people working together. I didn't have my own studio. Pretty good system, but now it's changed. Maybe good too, because everybody knows there's no such thing as a free lunch. You always do something of what they want you to do. But fortunately this painting was not what they wanted me to do. I wanted to do it myself. And then I think I was done. After I came to America, I no longer wanted to do that kind of painting anymore.

**(JD):** When you went to the Beijing Hua Yuan, how did you get to the Beijing Hua Yuan?

**(ZH):** Beijing Hua Yuan is a very old institute, based on those very famous traditional Chinese painters. But slowly they wanted to get oil painters. But during the Cultural Revolution, there were people getting old. A lot of artists died. So they needed new blood. At the same time, they heard that artists who had finished their reeducation were coming back to the city so they wanted to choose which artists they liked. At that time they had a list of names, which they thought were the better students that they wanted, and one of the names was me. So they contacted me and asked me to give them a portfolio. And I gave it to them and they liked my work.

**(JD):** So you had already graduated from The Central Academy?

**(ZH):** No, at that time we were still in art high school.

(JD): In Fuzhong?

(ZH): Yes, Fuzhong, exactly. They didn't care because by that time, the early 80's there were no art students, no art school. They were supposed to only get students from the college level, but by that time they said that anybody that is good enough they wanted.

(JD): And is that where Liu Xun was?

(ZH): No, interestingly, when I got there, Liu Xun was not there yet. I was already there about two years. One day we saw a little short man with very short hair and we didn't know who he was. But at the same time, I had another trip to the Yellow River. We were together and we became very good friends. He is very open and I just love to talk anyway, so we had a very good friendship. Later we learned that he had just come out from jail, and also that he was a hero against Jiang Qing and all those powerful people. And very soon he became a leader. Not only the art school's leader, but also the Zhong Guo Mei Shu Jia Xie Hui art association leader. So we were very close, Liu Xun and I. He really liked me and I really liked him. He's very very good. Unfortunately, the year he died, I didn't even know.

(JD): I had the great fortune of interviewing him before he died, but he was very frail, but still a wonderful man...

(ZH): We were not allowed to paint. But that really made painting more exciting. It's like you go out to paint like you sneak out to have a date with your lover.

(JD): It's a beautiful photo.

(ZH): You can have the CD. And also you can see what I've painted. [Pointing to Rich Field on the computer screen.] It's so happy. Even now, I see those paintings, I can remember the feeling. [Pointing to Sketch of Village Girls, 1972 on the computer screen.]

(JD): The pigtails and the bright colored shirts.

(ZH): Now also, reeducation taught me to never give up painting. So that's why, so many years now, I just say nobody can stop me painting, even a rich life, good money, doesn't matter. I just want to paint. It's so simple now. This is my late wife. She was so wonderful, very very talented. Now in China, some blogs talk about her more than they talk about me.

(JD): Was she at your university as well? Was she at Fuzhong as well?

(ZH): No, actually not. She was at Beijing Art School. Beijing Yi Xiao. Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, when they made their first movie, Yellow Earth (Huang Tu Di), they came to my apartment and asked her about the screenplay, how to change the story, and sure, asked me about what I think, so she's very, very bright. And very, very talented. [Pointing to another painting on a computer screen.] This is when we were together. But more important is, when she came into my life, she just almost brought all my energy out, so I did all these paintings. [Pointing to another painting on the computer screen] This is a painting from when I was young, and that one. You can see I produced a lot. [Pointing to the people in a photograph on the computer screen.] This is Wang Huaiqing, Li Zhongliang, Ni Zhen, Zhang Hongzhu, Zhang Jianping, Jiang Dahai [?], this is my wife, Li Xin, this is me, and the translator.

(JD): So you were also in the Contemporaries, Tongdairan?

(ZH): Yes. Actually, the name was my idea because by that time, I was working on a painting I called Tongdairan. Actually, I used Chen Kaige as a model. And I took a picture of him. But unfortunately, that painting was never finished.

(JD): ... was it attached to your hua yuan (art school)?

(ZH): No, actually it was given by the hua yuan. That's why Liu Xun liked me so much. And by that time, you know how difficult it was to get an apartment, and Liu Xun gave it to me. Liu Xun said, "You bribe me. Buy one shuang yang rou." Because you know, I didn't need to bribe him, he was just-

(JD): He was just making a joke. [Pointing to a photo on the computer screen.] So this is your apartment. And whose are these paintings on the walls?

(ZH): They're all mine. They're all studies.

(JD): And so this is a party you were having at your house?

(ZH): Yes, we were talking, smoking a lot. This is one of the paintings in the Tong Dai Show.

(JD): And that was in Tong Dai Ren? That was in the show?

(ZH): That one was in Tong Dai Ren.

(JD): That was in the show. That went to the Meishu Guan?

(ZH): Yes, Mei Shu Guan. And this one was actually collected by the National Museum.

(JD): I've seen it published.

(ZH): This one is in the museum too.

(JD): And it was widely exhibited. That was exhibited in one of the Quan Guo Mei Zhan.

(ZH): Yes, they collected it because it was kind of like a milestone for Scar Art in that period.

(JD): So that would've been considered Scar Art in that period?

(ZH): Yes, Scar Art. Any article talking about Scar Art named this one, named Cheng Conglin and Li Bin [?]. They did maybe three or four paintings and this was one of them.

(JD): So when they called this Scar Art, when you painted this, were you aware that other artists like Cheng Conglin were in Sichuan?

(ZH): No, I didn't.

(JD): So were you aware that they were painting?

(ZH): No, I didn't. What's so interesting is that it was very natural. Because by the time we suddenly felt we could speak out, and talk about the truth, and we were tired of smiley faces, cheerful sunshine, those kinds of things, we had a lot of darkness and we needed to show that. And we were so hurt, our generation. So in this way, we weren't like, let's have a meeting and talk about, 'Let's do a Scar Art movement', no, it just happened that we were thinking the same.

(JD): That's amazing. And the idea of Scar Art, the name Scar Art, some people say it was-

(ZH): From one short story.

(JD): From the short story. Right. But I guess from the maple, feng-

(ZH): Feng is one, another is called shang hen. So these are two similar times. I don't even know if it was the same writer, but similar times. And so this is what I called my period, almost like Scar Art, very political. But then I talked to myself, I said, "How long can political subjects have life?" So I said that I need to focus more on art. This is why I went to other art forms, or different styles. This is what I call min ge (folk songs).

(JD): So inspired more by folk art.

(ZH): Yes, by folk art. And that's the reason we got the reeducation...[Point to photo of Present From Earth, 1982 on computer screen] So same colors, same kind of language, the cutting, and the colors inside to leave some white, so I used their language. I did the same with this painting. But then I felt tired, because people still

loved it. All the magazines published it immediately when this painting went to the show. But not a lot of people followed me. Later I learned actually people kind of enjoyed it, especially the young generation. They're thinking, but they're too young and I already started to feel tired.

**(JD):** When you say you started feeling tired, why did you feel tired?

**(ZH):** Tired because you know, people say on the top it's cold, you're alone. And you don't feel like you can turn to a lot of people. And also, you need to not think naturally. You need to use your brain to think of how to create another new style, because I like to be a leading artist, you know that kind of position. But that makes me tired. Later, when I went to see the Tibetans, when I decided to do those kinds of paintings, I felt that was very natural. Almost like when you're singing songs and I didn't have to use a sharp voice, I could use my natural voice in my range.

**(JD):** So how did you get to Tibet?

**(ZH):** Really by accident. We were at Beijing Hua Yuan by that time, Deng Lin and a couple more leaders, we were together on a trip to see Jiuzhaigou, just for fun. But it made me so tired because the local people, because Deng Xiaoping is from the same province. So the local officials treated Deng Lin as very special. Everyday it was a big meal, we had policemen in the front opening the road. I decided to not follow them anymore. I said I want to go to Hongyuan because not too far from Jiuzhaigou is Hongyuan, with Tibetan people living there. So I just felt that I just wanted to have fun. I wasn't even prepared. I had one bag, by myself, nobody followed me, and I fell in love with their life. I felt so simple and quiet and harmonious. But also very successful. [Points to Preparing for Winter on the computer screen] See this painting I put in the show. By that time it was the National Show or the Quan Guo Mei Shu Zhan Lan, a very big show.

**(JD):** That was in 1984, the big 1984 show.

**(ZH):** Yes, that show. And that show actually, I won the Bronze prize. But another thing that was more exciting, is that Shen Jiawei was my spy. The oil painting was in Shen Yang. And Shen Jiawei was there and he could not get in. But he had a spy, and he goes in and all those older professors Jin Shangyi, Wu Baizhou, all those of the older generation, they judged with red paper and green paper. If you like it, you put maybe green, I forget.

**(JD):** It's like a post-it.

**(ZH):** Yes. And mine was the only one everybody liked. Because they always have different opinions, some say, "I like this". And if you're over five, then you're in. But mine was - everybody loved it. So I felt very good because I could not win the gold prize because that year, the gold prize was for artists who did the things of hope. That was a period of country reform, like the farmers getting the land and they have the band. A very beautiful painting, but politically hit at a very important moment. That got the golden prize.

**(JD):** Which painting was it? The golden prize? Because I thought it was the painting of the little boy.

**(ZH):** No it wasn't, that maybe got silver or something. Yes I think it was a lot of farmers, they have a band.

**(JD):** And it wasn't realist, it was almost like a folk painting.

**(ZH):** No, it had a little bit of strong brushwork, but not really - I think it was a very good painting. And I think it was so right in that moment.

**(JD):** It caught the political moment. Who was the artist?

**(ZH):** Oh I don't know. But this painting in the National Museum, they collected it and they sent it to an oil painting show in Russia. That painting went to Russia and recently in the National Museum, Lois was there, we passed there, a sign said, "Minority Subject Collection of the Museum". So I said, "That painting must be in the show." So we went to see the painting, it was the first time that she [points to Lois Woolley] saw the painting.

**(JD):** Oh in real life?

**Lois Woolley (LW):** See it's in the collection but the way many museums work is that they don't have everything in their collection out at any one time, so. I just had not ever seen it, and it's great to have it out. It's not common that museums will put paintings out during an artist's lifetime. So it's nice when you have a chance.

**(ZH):** You can pay to get it in.

**(LW):** That's different. This is when they choose the show.

**(ZH):** Two exhibitions. When I was there it was either one or two exhibitions, I'm not entirely clear now. But I think in total I held two exhibitions.

**(JD):** One of the directions of our research is, since we are a library and we have some archives, we want to ask of artists who were active in the 1980s, because we find that the 1980s were a more open time period than the 1970s, did books at that time have a bigger influence on your art?

**(ZH):** There was a big influence. Because at that time, the gallery received several Japanese-published international art publications. The print level was very high. We particularly liked to read those ones. But at the time, there were several things that were still very new to us. For example, the Italian artist Modigliani. I thought I absolutely wouldn't like his paintings, with the female with the very long neck. But then I ended up very much liking his paintings. So people need to be more open in how they think. So in that sense, these publications had a big influence.

Separately, the Arnaud Hammer exhibition in 1982, at the time it came to China, introduced Andrew Wyeth, John Singer Sargent, and Zo-er [?] at the same time was introduced from Europe. So these painters for the realist painters, the influence was particularly big. Because before that time, we were fundamentally influenced by Russia and the Soviet Union. But now we could see, for example, Sargent's brush strokes were very beautiful. Andrew Wyeth's paintings were very serene and deep. A feeling of profound quiet. These were things that you couldn't find in our paintings. So this influence was also very great. Later when I was in America, people would still ask me what my influences were. And I would say it was that time period. Zo-er knows that even now in my book collection, I have [his/her] works. Their paintings had many beautiful aspects. Russian art I still like very much, and perhaps will never say that I don't like their art. But their work focuses on a kind of directness, an yinshu zhuyi "Earthy", to say it in English. But from Sargent to Zo-er and Andrew Wyeth, their paintings are more graceful and beautiful. This influence is still big. Indeed, this is what allowed me to widen my scope and understand that if I had an opportunity to go abroad, I would definitely learn much more.

**(JD):** Getting back to the topic of books, in the 1970s or 1980s, when you were at the gallery, was there a library, or were the works stored in a particular place? Was there a place where you could view those books?

**(ZH):** The gallery had a library. At the time, I think that set of World Art books had a big influence. My impression at the time had to do with Wang Lu [?], whose father was Wang Yequ [?]. Going through these methods was the only way to buy these things. Because I think you could only use foreign currency. They were very expensive and high-class. It exposed us to a high level of books, high level of enjoyment, and a high level of education, so it was a very good thing. But they were rare. Bookstores just didn't have these kinds of books. Also we probably just hadn't acquired the habit of going to the Beijing Library to look at them. I bet if you went to the Beijing Library, you could find books like this there, but then you wouldn't be able to borrow them because there'd always be someone ahead of you who had already checked it out. So our gallery's set of books helped us out a great deal.

**(JD):** Did you encounter any philosophy books? We heard that there were many philosophy translations in the 1980s, maybe 1981 or 1982, there were several old translators and philosophers, like German philosophy.

**(ZH):** There was Sartre

(JD): And Freud

(ZH): We had them. The influence was there, but perhaps it was greater for those of the more recent generation, like Bei Dao. It's not that philosophy wouldn't change our perspective, but rather that things weren't as much of a puzzle for us. Plus what was more important these days was for us to use our own techniques and the ideas that we already had to create. But I remember there was an oil painting of Sartre called *Cun Dai Zhu Yi*.

(JD): Zhong Ming.

(ZH): Right, Zhong Ming. How is Zhong Ming these days?

(JD): Zhong Ming is doing well. He's currently still in Beijing doing various things, but he's no longer a painter. He could be doing philosophy.

(ZH): Right. So there are some that are increasingly paying more attention to studying philosophy. I've read a few of these books, but my feeling at the time was that they could give you some courage to think, but I didn't feel the need to actively seek philosophy because I felt that the courage it gave you was enough for you to go off and think on your own rather than having to follow their ideas. So I don't think that at the time I had any major transformations. And more importantly, I was eager to create my own life experiences, to finally be able to manifest them.

(Q): And so your stream-of-consciousness?

(ZH): Oh right. I don't want to say that I was heavily influenced by Freud and ideas about the subconscious at the time, but I knew about them, I understood the ideas but I never studied his writings. But understanding was enough. Understanding them meant that they gave me a choice. I understood that I could paint my subconscious. Because many of my paintings have elements of the subconscious. Since that can become ideology, then of course I can use it in my paintings. But that's not to say that I completely imported his ideas into my paintings. Because I more or less still had some questions about their philosophy because at the time, I realized that philosophies reflect the context from which they arose. They had their own culture, their own time periods. And our thinking had also changed a lot, from the time before the Cultural Revolution, to the time during the Cultural Revolution, to the time after the Cultural Revolution, within this 10-year time period, our thinking changed profoundly. So in my opinion, it's not how other people think that matters, but rather I have to look at what I'm thinking. So at that time, I painted based on what I thought. I wasn't actively seeking other ways of thinking. But at the same time, my first wife, she really liked that kind of thing. She read a lot of Marx, even more than me. She would always joke that I didn't understand Marxism and felt that she did. I really didn't like reading these theoretical books, but at the time we subscribed to magazines about international studies and current events, we read them every week. But she studied these things more deeply.

(JD): What danwei (work unit) was she in?

(ZH): She was in Beijing Gewutuan. She was a stage designer. But she really liked writing. She wrote many screenplays and short stories that stayed in her desk drawer.

(JD): What a shame.

(ZH): Right. Which is why, I mentioned earlier, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou would ask her to help them edit their screenplay for the *Yellow Earth*. At the time she also wanted to study film and acting, and so did Chen Kaige. They both wanted to find Xie Tian [?], the old actor, to help them perform, but my wife felt she was too shy to be able to perform, so she never pursued it. Many people thought it was a pity, though, because she really did have talent in this field. But the bigger pity was that her health wasn't good and that passed away pretty early in life....

At the time I was studying art, the program was two years and I had already studied one year, but I had a friend who returned from America who said I ought to go to America. He described the museums to me and I



thought it sounded great. And what's more, this was my only opportunity.

**(JD):** Who was this painter?

**(ZH):** She was a violinist. We knew each other growing up and she's a very talented violinist. Her husband is Zhi Hui. They were both musicians but we shared a similar language in terms of art. So my thinking in coming to America was one, to study and two, to see what America, the world's biggest stage, was really like. At the time when I came, I didn't think of the hardships. All I had was US\$30. The Chinese government said, you can go abroad to study but we'll only exchange up to US\$30 for you to go. So I took my US\$30 and came to the America. When I think about it now, it's terrifying. I didn't even understand how taxis worked when I came to New York. But thankfully I had some friends who picked me up and helped me find a place to live and one person even let me stay with them, although I still had to pay rent. But that's another story because I didn't have any money to pay for rent.

At the time, my feeling was, as I previously mentioned, this world is so big. We shouldn't just stay in one place. After a few years, when I went back to the art school and was talking with everyone there, I was talking to a friend whose thinking at the time was still rather conservative, who told me [if you wanted to study you should've come back. But then I thought, "This person is from Shandong, why did he come to Beijing?" I think we all want to see the world. At the time, I wanted to see the world. Later I wrote a piece called "Hua Jia" where I summarized my thinking during this time. At first I didn't think I would stay here. But then I realized in America that I have my market. People like my paintings. So on top of that, after struggling for a few years, I wanted to enjoy the rewards. So I had good reasons for not wanting to go back. But not going back didn't necessarily mean that I wasn't patriotic. I not only was patriotic, but I could do things that I wouldn't be able to do in my own country. Plus, I often went back and when I got older, I went back more often. But going back to my story, when I came to America, I didn't have any energy to prepare. I just wanted to see the world and learn a few things. But the biggest problem was my financial situation. Language was also a big problem. I would joke that when people would talk to me, my whole body would break into a sweat. After a few months, a friend asked me how my English was and I said I'd improved. When they asked me how did I improve, did I understand English? I'd say I still don't understand. And he responded, "Then how did you improve?" And I said that I no longer broke out into a sweat. Because I didn't care anymore, in any case I didn't understand. So I became used to it.

But over time, I learned a lot of useful things at City College. When I first got there, many professors said, 'what are you doing here? You should be teaching this class.' But my response was that first off I needed to maintain my student status so that I could stay here. Plus, I was lucky that these professors were abstract artists, so I ended up learning a lot. At first I thought, what are these teachers talking about? But I realized there was a lot of merit to what they were saying. So even though I was a realist painter, I learned a lot about abstract art that I would sneak into my paintings that wouldn't be apparent on the surface of things. For example, one teacher said something I didn't understand at first. When you paint, you shouldn't think with this area [points to forehead], but rather you should think from here [points to back of head]. I thought, "What is he talking about?" But later I realized he meant that you shouldn't have a fixed way of thinking. You need to first create, and then perhaps something unexpected will happen that enters your subconscious and unconsciously affects what you want to do. I think there's value in this idea, this perspective is right.

But I was fundamentally a realist artist. Why? For one thing, I had a realistic perspective. I needed to live. If I paint something about my subconscious, something surreal, then no one will buy my paintings, and then I might have to go back to China. Plus people still liked paintings from the style I had developed in China. And since I was in America for a long time, although I hadn't been anywhere else in the West, I felt that it at least didn't exist in one sole ideology. Because in China, everyone is so focused on modernizing. We must modernize or we'll fall behind. But in the US, you could do whatever you wanted to. I concluded that this really is a great place. China is like a pyramid with one center. America, on the other hand, has many centers. Each state has its

own laws. Each city has its own art market. So artists can do what they want to and are able to do. So I thought at that age I could learn a lot from the modern art I was exposed to, but I still focused long-term on realism because I still wanted to paint in this style.

So the first thing was to be able to understand what the professors were teaching. And then I had to think about how to earn money and live. I know for a lot of artists in the US, this first step is the hardest. A lot of artists start out working on the streets drawing portraits; even in Nanjing there are artists on the street doing portraits. But they draw very well. I really respect them because they don't make you look prettier, but rather capture your true appearance. It's great that they can find models on the street to practice with. I never drew on the streets, but I did draw in a building. I lived on 120th Street. The building was full of people of all sorts of professions, professors, many were Columbia University professors. They would tape an advertisement in the elevator advertising that a famous Chinese artist can do quick sketches for \$15. So then some people in the building invited me to do their portraits. And there were musicians who would practice in the basement whose portrait I did for money.

So even just starting out it was pretty easy. But then over time I had friends who wanted to see my oil paintings. I had brought some oil paintings with me, and they asked if they were on sale. I didn't know how to sell paintings, because in China, we don't sell paintings. They don't have a price. So I asked my roommate who was also an artist. I asked, "How do I sell these paintings?" And he said for a painting this big [gestures a space around 20"x16"] about US\$400. I thought wow, that's pretty good. I could pay you rent with that. So through some friends I sold some small paintings. And then when I met James Cox, my life began to change.

**(JD):** Can you tell us the story of how you met him from your point of view?

**(ZH):** At the time I knew I needed a gallery. But how I would find one I had no idea because I once brought my portfolio with me in a bag and walk into a gallery. And the gallery told me to put my bag by the door, meaning they thought I'd steal their art. So I thought, forget it, people aren't going to believe me and I didn't have the courage to show people my art. So I basically waited, waited to death. I really didn't know what to do. At this time, the centennial memorial for the Statue of Liberty took place. The government held a competition. Whoever created the best replica of the Statue of Liberty could have their work reproduced and sold. A Chinese sculptor named Wang Jida won the competition. He's a very good sculptor. Not only was his sculpture accurate, the proportions were right, balanced, and the shape were all very good. Many newspapers and news outlets noted that in China, he did Mao's portrait, and now in the West he did the Statue of Liberty's portrait. It was a good political story. Then James Cox heard about him. At the time, James Cox was the director of Grand Central. Grand Central was a very good gallery. You know in New York that galleries are divided into different districts and styles. This was at 57th Street between 5th and 6th Aves. It was the best gallery for realism because it was founded by John Sargent. At that time it already had a 60 or 70-year history. It was very influential. It was not only a gallery, but it also focused on education and became a place that nurtured many realist painters. So James Cox was very interested and wished to meet Wang Jida and see his work. Wang Jida's wife, Jing Gao, was a very good painter. She was my teacher. Why? She never taught me directly, but her students were my teachers, so we all had to call her teacher.

**(JD):** She was also at Meishu Xueyuan?

**(ZH):** Yes, but she graduated in 1950. After graduating, she was sent to Inner Mongolia. She later on was Inner Mongolia's Art Director. She was very knowledgeable, and you could tell her anything, because she was like a teacher, like a big sister who would help you out, very kind. But both of them couldn't speak English. Who did the translation? Chen Danqing. When I came to the US, I met Chen Danqing and we would often go to the Metropolitan Museum to sit together and then go out for a coffee, talking about our problems and whatnot. So Chen Danqing knew I was having a hard time. So he asked Wang Jida and Jing Gao if he could bring my paintings along as well. So he dragged me with him. In the past I had written him a letter saying he should

pursue art. People are like that. In certain times in your life you need some help, and at this time he helped me a lot. Because even though Wang Jida and Jing Gao had come from the same school as I, we didn't know each other. But they were also very kind. They didn't say, 'No, we don't want you to come.' They said, 'Come come, let's all go together.' So then I brought my paintings along as well. I didn't have money to buy a stretcher, so I didn't stretch them out first. I just brought them rolled up to their apartment in Queens and used bricks to anchor the corners of the paintings on the floor. And that's how I showed them. After James Cox saw their work and mine, he had an idea. He really liked our work and wanted to hold an exhibition for us.

**(JD):** So how did you feel about that?

**(ZH):** I was definitely very happy, but I didn't realize that this was the most important gallery. It wasn't just any gallery. Nowadays many galleries want my work and some galleries aren't that great, don't have much of a market. This was an important gallery. So at the time I was quite happy, but it was only later I realized I should've been extremely happy. Because once this exhibition took place, our lives changed. Completely changed. Some funny things happened during that time. Like when I was preparing for the exhibition, I told James that I had some friends who were coming to buy my paintings, and he told me to stop selling them. When he asked how much I was selling them for and I said US\$400, he told me I had to stop selling them and bring my paintings to his gallery. And after I did that, things weren't the same. Because a gallery is a gallery. Once you give them a painting, they'll fix a price to it. So the story goes that I brought a small painting, like one that I'd sold in the past, to the gallery. A husband and wife came in. And the Grand Central gallery is particularly beautiful. They have a 24-hr elevator and they rode the elevator to the offices upstairs. There were a lot of American realist paintings hanging on the walls and my small painting was leaning against a wall. So after this couple looked around, they said that they liked my painting. They asked how much, and James said US\$4,000. So in a flash, things were no longer the same.

**(JD):** They bought it?

**(ZH):** They took out their checkbook right there and bought it. So the status of a gallery really is important. It affects the caliber of your work and the level of trust people have in you. At the time, the exhibition was very influential, and people regarded it as groundbreaking. Because prior to this time, Chen Yufei had held an exhibition, as did Chen Danqing, but their impact was felt mainly within the scope of the galleries. But this exhibition suddenly achieved national recognition. For example, a reporter on a CBS Sunday morning show talked about our exhibition on his show.

**(JD):** Was it because the exhibition was at Grand Central, and Grand Central is a special type of gallery, not necessarily a business-focused gallery.

**(ZH):** It wasn't a for-profit gallery but they had a board of directors and they did a lot of art education, so many people liked this gallery. You could go not only to buy art but also to learn about it, so it gained the support of a lot of collectors. The gallery held a lot of informal discussion that included many important guests, including Art News, a leading art magazine that focused more on the avant-garde. But their editor came especially to see this exhibition, and their impression of us was very great. They invited some of us to their offices to visit. They not only advertised the Grand Central but also wrote a piece about the exhibition. So it was a formal introduction of Chinese oil painting to the West. The influence in China was also very great. At the time, in a newspaper that for whatever reason no longer exists, they published a piece on our exhibition in the context of China's economy becoming more open. Not only was the piece very big, but it also listed the prices of our paintings. This gave Chinese artists a guide to prices, like what the price should be of a painting by someone with the skills of a teacher at the Zhong Yang Mei Yuan, because before no one knew. When foreigners would come to buy paintings, Chinese artists would carelessly give them away. You say how much, I'll give it away for that price. Now there was finally a more formal standard for how much a painting should cost. So this exhibition was very important. And of course it was very successful. Later on people said that it was also a

good thing the exhibit was held at a time before the US economy began to decline.

**(JD):** 1987?

**(ZH):** 1986. 1987 to 1989, the economy began go bad. It was still pretty good in 1986, so the paintings sold very well.

**(JD):** Your paintings all sold?

**(ZH):** They all sold very well.

**(JD):** How much money did your paintings sell for at that time?

**(ZH):** So like I said, a painting of about this size [gestures about 20"x16"] sold for around US\$4,000 [Gestures wider and wider] to US\$10,000 for the bigger ones. Some could've even gone over US\$10,000. I remember that the painting that was printed on the invitation, a painting called Close to the Land, a collector saw it and really liked it. He called his wife in Arizona and told her she had to immediately fly to the opening. And then they bought the painting. The exhibition was very popular.

**(JD):** Do you still talk to any of the people who bought your paintings?

**(ZH):** No I don't keep in touch with any of them. And I probably shouldn't because at the time, the gallery wanted us to work through them directly. But one time, since the exhibition was so successful, James took us to the Grand Canyon in Arizona. We went to the house of the people who had bought my painting and when I saw my painting, I was moved to the point of tears. It was like seeing my own child being adopted by other people. It was hanging in a very luxurious study.

From this moment, we were introduced to the American art market. We learned that it had its own rules. For example, I did paintings of Tibet for specific reasons, but I probably wouldn't have continued to paint them. But when I came to the US, people liked them, and the gallery told me I should continue painting them. So I continued for several years to do paintings with Tibetan subject matter. Over time I painted less of them, and by the time I came to Woodstock, I decided to stop painting them. I'd already lived in the US for ten years, I should be painting American subject matter. There is a lot of freedom that comes with being an artist, but a lot of times that freedom disappears because your gallery wants you to paint this, and you can't just refuse to do it because that causes problems. So I slowly earned my complete freedom. Right now I feel completely free. But the mid-1980s to the end of the 1980s was mainly a time for realist painters, like our gallery at Grand Central, which led people to pay more attention to Chinese oil painting. In that CBS piece, they open by asking, 'Chinese art consists of landscapes and watercolors, right? Well actually, there's also oil painting.'

But modern art still has it. Like Ai Weiwei and people like that, they also had exhibitions after about 3 or 4 years. But I saw those as more a cultural exercise. I probably didn't understand it. I don't want them to think I'm saying anything bad about them because I think they were doing what suited them. So I didn't join their group because the art market in America needed me to continue painting in this way. Plus, after this exhibition, my second one in 1987 had been influenced by the economic condition at the time, and I sold half the works, which isn't bad, and I could finally be able to paint for a living. But I didn't spend any of my money because at that time I was waiting for my wife and daughter to come. Because while I was at Grand Central, the biggest thing they did for me was to help me apply for a green card. Green cards were very sought after because with them, you could go back to China and return to the US whenever you wanted. So I really became tied up in this green card. But while I was applying for my green card, I couldn't come and go as I pleased. I of course went back when my wife got sick. My wife and daughter both got their green cards when she got sick, but by that point, she was no longer healthy enough to travel. By then, my livelihood was very tied to painting. I still felt the delight and freedom of creating art, because I was focusing on my skills at the time I was creating many of those paintings. For example, using different techniques. The subject matter was still about Tibet, but I felt my

biggest influences were the classical glazing, transparent techniques that I saw in the museums. I used lots of different techniques in that time period. So I turned painting into an art, technique, subject of study, research, and incorporated many different aspects of my home and Chinese culture, and on top of that, earned money.

**(JD):** At that time, you also exhibited with Chen Danqing. How did his paintings sell? How was he received as an artist in the US?

**(ZH):** I can only talk about what really happened. I don't want my words to hurt him. But at the first exhibition, his works didn't sell well. There were several reasons for this. His paintings were excellent. I really liked them. But American realist painters and collectors favored colors a lot more. Now Chen Danqing's paintings, the composition, brushwork, and the feelings they evoked were all excellent. But he didn't emphasize color. His use of color was more reserved. This was a tragedy. Afterwards I felt I had to apologize. He helped me participate in this exhibition, and back in China, he had already started doing paintings about Tibet pretty early on in China. But my paintings sold better than his. I felt very apologetic. But Chen Danqing has a very big heart. He said, so what, anyone could paint the Last Supper. So I think he's a very bright, very big-hearted artist. He was so wonderful. So much better than me in the sense that, maybe because I was older than him, I worried a lot about when my wife and children were going to come. He also had a lot of problems. His wife and daughter also hadn't come yet. But he was really focused on his studies. At the time he had a, what we call in Chinese wangnianjiao, which is a friendship despite a big age difference, called Mu Xin, who was a very famous writer and painter. Their relationship was very good. Mu Xin was going through hard times as well. He was making a living selling his writing in newspapers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the US. His writing receives a lot of attention from other writers now because people regard him as Lu Xun's successor, having been able to bridge the gap between classical and modern literature. Chen Danqing learned a lot from him. And what I mean is that Chen Danqing organized a study group and invited us all to attend. We would give Mu Xin money and he would teach us about culture. But because I felt like I couldn't calm my mental state enough to study, I only went once or twice and then stopped going. They continued holding these classes by the time I had already moved to Woodstock.

At that time, I think Chen Danqing was thinking about other things he could do. Since we were friends, we often spent time together, attending events and activities, both artistic and just for leisure, but I don't recall him ever having another exhibition at Grand Central. Jing Gao had one, and another artist named Li Quanwu. But not Chen Danqing. This all had to do with the poor economic situation at the time. And also at that time, on 42nd Street, there was a hua shi that I'd never been to before. I could've already moved to Woodstock by then. Because I moved to Woodstock in 1991. My wife passed away in 1990, and my daughter moved here in 1990. And then I moved to Woodstock in the spring of 1991. Another story of this time is that there was a gallery in, what was then, the Soviet Union, that really liked my work. They wanted to hold an exhibition for me and told me they could make me a world-renowned artist. I asked them how they could do this, and they said they had publishing abilities. They said they could bypass the publishing houses and make you into a world-renowned artist. First off, I thought it was a bit strange. And then they stipulated that I not have any relationship with any other gallery. I said thanks for your good intentions, but Grand Central is still helping me apply for my green card and I can't work with any other gallery right now. So I lost the opportunity to be a world-renowned artist. I don't want to say anything more because it might affect them, although this gallery may no longer exist, but I know this gallery had these capabilities.

**(ZH):** For what reason? When I left, I didn't think I betrayed my homeland, but I felt like I had broken away from that system. The system, in China, is very important. For example, Zhong Yang Mei Shu Xueyuan is a system. So in this school, all the teachers and students have a deep relationship. We're all in the same circle, that kind of feeling. Now I felt a bit apologetic. In all the country, in over 8 years, they only accepted 5 students in the

hopes of us remaining in this circle and continuing to work on behalf of the school. But I left. After I left, I felt like I had to apologize because they had supported me while I was there. But when I go back, some artists will interview me. When I went back in 1987/1988, it was printed in the art magazines. So I had to be careful when I spoke because whatever I said they'd print in the magazine. Someone might say I didn't give them a high enough assessment of their work or whatnot. But I don't think my opinion mattered very much. Art is a very multi-faceted thing. I would like for everyone to create what they can and what they are good at creating. For example, at that time when I went back, there wasn't much of an art market in China. Some people would ask me what kinds of paintings are easy to sell? I would say, 'If I tell you this, don't think I'm being a phony, but you should paint what you really like to paint.' Because this is the only way you'll do it well and do it the best that you can. For example with me, if I were to paint something abstract, I couldn't compare with the American painters. But if I painted in a realism style, I was still pretty good, so I painted in that way. I painted what I liked and what I could do well. But then later on I would change with the times. For example, after a period when I painted traditional Chinese paintings, I felt a bit distant. So I looked at America and felt like I understood the American pilgrims, so then I started to paint the pilgrims. And then I moved on to painting American life. And then after I had formed relationships with well-established international magazines, I could paint my most favorite thing, which are historical paintings.

**(JD):** Hefner also put on an exhibition in 1987. Did you go to this exhibition?

**(ZH):** I did go because I think Hefner was inspired by our exhibition because the Grand Central exhibit happened in 1986. He was a collector. And his idea was to buy many Chinese artists' paintings and continue the success of our gallery exhibition with his own exhibition, which was very big. I definitely went because Wang Huaqing, Ai Xuan, Wang Yidong, I knew these three. Wang Huaqing was the same generation painter as me, Ai Xuan was my childhood friend, and Wang Yidong is a very good painter, I really respect him. When they were in Arizona, I had never met them, but when they came to New York, I met them. But they came up at a very bad time because of the poor economic situation. So at the time, those paintings were all very inexpensive and Hefner picked them up. But now these paintings are very expensive.

**(JD):** But I don't think he sold them; just collected them.

**(ZH):** He collected them but he also sold some. And now the market is much better. At the time, this exhibition also had a big influence. It had good publicity and many people were invited to the opening. These artists hadn't experienced a lot of success because they hadn't gone through the period when lots of art was being sold. So for the people going abroad in the 1980s, that time was initially a highlight but then it wasn't as good. But slowly that's changing. For example, I was on the West Coast, in San Antonio, or just in any good gallery across the US, you could find at least one Chinese painting. So we sort of acted as pioneers. But I much preferred being in a place like Woodstock and be able to quietly do my painting. I thought, no matter if I'm in New York or Beijing, the city is too much. You're always looking at other people's exhibitions, and the restrictions that galleries place on you is greater. But I didn't have these problems once I moved to Woodstock. James and Fletcher's galleries, they've never cared what I paint. I paint what I want, which is nice. As long as it sells.

**(JD):** We might have to end soon but I still want to ask you something. Near the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, between that time, the June 4 incident happened. What impact did June 4 have on you while you were in the US?

**(ZH):** At the time it was interesting to us. From the beginning, the reaction was more direct. We were in America so we saw it filtered through an American perspective. We artists and young people thought it was a tragedy. For

the government to act like that was wrong. But later our thinking was that, and this may sound too political, but this is coming from my heart. First of all, in America we saw American democracy. American democracy has fixed laws. If you have someone staying on 5th Ave for a week, then the police might come see what's going on too. So the young people at the time hoped for democracy and to reform these bad trends, but they didn't know how to achieve it. So this is a problem that both sides have.

But of course any death is a tragedy. But to evaluate this, I think we have to see the ultimate outcome. The first outcome is that at the time, China didn't get more chaotic. To really open the way for democracy, the economy has to become stronger and the middle class has to become more mature and have a sense of culture and economic power. So it was important to ensure the opening of China's economy. Plus, China was too poor in the past. It needed to become wealthier and it needed peace. After all this happened, I felt like we should write a testimony of what happened for all the people that died, because many of their deaths were without reason.

**(JD):** I understand. During the 1980s in China, I don't want to say it was open, but it was a more open period. There were some small newspapers, books and smaller publishing houses that were more open in what they could publish that all no longer existed after June 4.

**(ZH):** Including the one I mentioned earlier called Jingji Dao Bao, that had published the prices of our paintings.

**(JD):** Or even opportunities for exhibitions and the more avant-garde artists.

**(ZH):** Was it in '89? I think my family situation restricted me a lot more. Well, at the time everyone participated in those protests, artists and young people.

**(JD):** Oh you mean the protests in 1989 started by artists? You didn't attend?

**(ZH):** Of course I attended, I was still relatively young, not anymore though. But I was more familiar with the atmosphere in China because we understood that in China, people pay more attention to the government, whereas Americans don't as much. Plus Chinese people prefer group activities whereas Americans prefer individual activities. So you can see this reflected in several different ways. Well America had that kind of feeling too when it affected their own lives, like when people didn't want to go fight in Vietnam, but they for the most part aren't like that.

**(JD):** Right. So what year did you come to Woodstock?

**(ZH):** I came to Woodstock in 1991. My wife died in 1990...