

THE 1985 NEW WAVE ART MOVEMENT

Gao Minglu

ORIGINS

After the *Sixth Annual All China Art Exhibition* was held in 1984, numerous art exhibitions were organised by groups of young artists all over China. These exhibitions were streams that eventually flowed into the main course of the New Wave movement that took place in 1985.

This art movement has a complex background. It is a reflection of the comparative studies of Western and Chinese culture that have burgeoned in China in recent years, and it is also an outcome of confrontations between Chinese and Western culture. The spirit behind this movement is a reconsideration of tradition in the face of yet another assault by Western culture following the opening of China to the West, an examination of the last creative period, and bold experimentation in bringing Chinese art into the modern world. In the realm of theory, contrary schools of thought developed out of questions of nationalism versus internationalism, tradition versus modernity, etc. But in actual practice, the predominant ideology was "importism," the borrowing, copying and outright theft of ideas from Western art.

When criticising this new trend for following in others' footsteps or copying the West, let us not forget that the history of modern and contemporary Chinese culture is one of constant borrowing from and interacting with Western culture. And if we admire the courage with which such artists as Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong absorbed foreign elements into their art, we must consider the differences between the Western culture they studied at that time, and that same culture today, and ask the question of whether or not they attained their ultimate goal. If they did attain their goal, then is their way of attaining it an immutable model for all future activity in this regard?

Discussions about these questions were heard in the early years of China's opening to the West, when the eventual group nature of the 1985 New Wave movement first became evident. However, there were differences in terms of motivation on several levels. The early years were characterised by acts of defiance on the emotional level which grew out of anger at and frustration with the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which rarely was raised to the level of rational discourse in the cultural context.

The post-Cultural Revolution period saw the appearance of such trends as "scar art," "art for art's sake," "stream of life," and "pseudo-naturalism." At the *Sixth Annual All China Art Exhibition*, these new styles appeared for the first time alongside idealistic realism, the "official" style of Chinese painting that had taken three decades to develop, thus characterising the "pluralism" of contemporary Chinese art. The exhibition provided a conclusion to and an overview of one creative period in modern Chinese history. Psychologically speaking, it prepared contemporary Chinese painters for the 1985 New Wave. The dramatic reversals of history, and the cultural self-examination inspired by China's economic and materialistic opening to the outside world provided the climate and the soil in which this movement took root.

APPEARANCES

After the *Sixth All China Art Exhibition*, the majority of the art exhibitions were organised by groups of young artists, while only a few were connected to official international youth events. There were also exhibitions by middle-aged artists. Although few of the exhibitions lasted very long, they set off much controversy. The number of exhibitions was unprecedented in recent history, and was doubtless a positive outcome of the post Cultural Revolution period.

The 1985 New Wave can be divided into three trends: 1) rationality and religiosity; 2) intuitionism and mystery; and 3) renewed concepts and behaviorism. These will be discussed separately below.

1. Rationality and religiosity

This trend is represented by the Northern Art Group, Zhejiang 1985 New Space, and the *Jiangsu Youth Art Week Exhibition*. Most of the works in this trend were influenced by specific theoretical considerations. The Northern Art Group was made up of more than a dozen painters, writers and social and natural scientists. Their slogans, "After the Frigid Zone" and "Northern Culture," drew upon the idea of the movement of civilisations northwards over the course of history and the disintegration of culture in the tropics. The artists believed that both Eastern and Western culture face a predicament of unprecedented dimensions, the antidote for which is art that is rational, noble in its aims and serious in its intent. In their art they sought to convey the grandeur and eternity of the world. Their works convey religious feelings without any elements of superstition.

The Zhejiang painters also have respect for the rational spirit, but most of their thinking takes place before the act of creation, which they see as reliant on intuition. According to Gu Wenda, reason is historical and vertical, while intuition is the major factor in creativity. Gu is opposed to self-expression, and believes that the self is mere egotism. Human feeling should be sublimated onto the plane of the spiritual, which does not rely on visual experience, but rather on spiritual images that can be inferred from beyond the visual world. His huge ink paintings "express" his spiritual world and the rationally structured universe.

The paintings of the Zhejiang group have been criticised in the following words: "The subjects of the paintings appear to be numb, stupefied and eccentric. Is this the way things really are, or is this the painter's detached, cynical approach to reality?" Other discussions dealt with questions of imitation and originality, form and content, miscomprehension and philosophy.

Like the Zhejiang painters, the works of the *Jiangsu Youth Art Week Exhibition* start out from "stream of life" painting. But they differ from the Zhejiang group in their greater emphasis on man, the temporal aspects of history and dynamic comparisons, while the Zhejiang group emphasises simultaneity and static comparisons. They also believe that "stream of life" paintings cannot depict real human introspection, but rather display the spirit of "an eye for an eye" and have no sense of regret. Thus they reject dramatisation and superficial appeal in their works, preferring reality and reason. Ding Fang's *City* series (with its cultural and philosophical notions) and Shen Qin's *Dialogue between Master and Disciple* (with its religious and cultural notions) are representative of this school. On the whole, they lack theoretical direction, and thus they are sometimes forced to act as their own theorists. But their own thinking is so concretised that it never ceases to play havoc with them.

Another group of young and middle-aged artists in Shanghai also takes the road of reason. They draw upon Eastern and Western philosophy, anthropology and modern physics in the belief that tradition should be considered from the viewpoint of all mankind. To them, all painting from all cultures and eras is about one subject — man. In Zhang Jianzhong's *The Human Race and their Clocks*, representatives of every human type are placed in a strange sort of universal space where time runs backwards. This expresses the idea that the human race is always undermining its ability to understand itself in the search for "super-knowledge."

The paintings of the Anhui Oil Painting Research Society attempt to depict mental structures by breaking up thematic elements into distinct conceptual units, assigning certain images or themes to them and linking them up in a lively manner.

In their exhibition, entitled *Search, Discovery and Expression*, five young painters from Gansu expressed their philosophy through cool abstraction. Circles, squares and triangles symbolized heaven and earth and the mysteries of human life and the universe. Reason was also the guiding force in works by a group of Hunan artists in their *Zero* artists group exhibitions, but they also displayed a tendency towards cultural retrospection.

In many works, a concern with religion accompanied the pursuit of reason, but religion here had less to do with belief than with a reflection of culture and tradition, a pan-religiosity. For these painters, religion is a spiritual vehicle for a rebellion against an uninhibited outpouring of secular emotions (self-expression) and a poetic and romantic interpretation of reality (in the ideal). Through the vehicle of art, the mental attitude of looking reality in the eye is expressed through thoughts that transcend reality, the self and the human mind. Thus all the adjectives that can be applied to the external manifestations of religion — indifferent, isolated, mystifying — can be applied to the external appearances of these paintings. But a truly valid critique requires penetrating the philosophical, psychological and social concepts that lie behind their art, in order to solve the mystery of the "new religion."

2. *Intuitionism and mystery*

This tendency appeared in the *November Painting Exhibition* held in Beijing, the *New Image Exhibitions* held in Shanghai and Yunnan, the *Zero Exhibition* held in Shenzhen, and the *Contemporary Art Exhibition* held in Shanxi. It is noteworthy that this trend also appeared in exhibitions where the rational factor was the dominant trend, just as reason played a subsidiary role in many other exhibitions.

The catalogue of the Shanghai and Yunnan exhibitions began with the following statement: "Most importantly, we seek to shake up people's souls, rather than provide delight for people's eyes. Our works are not games of color and lines." They emphasise that to obtain truth it is necessary to return to the childhood of mankind, even to the origin of life itself — protozoic life. In the *New Image Exhibition*, Mao Xuhui and his colleagues painted moving, expanding and swelling hulks, which for them represent human instinct and blood types, which are synonymous with life. One of their credos is: Art is prayer, music, the song of the human soul. Art is the soul rocking the soul. All external forms are the symbols of the soul and the enlightenment of the soul. Wang Chuan of the *Shenzhen Zero Exhibition* depicts the struggle for survival on the part of the human race, individual nations, and even the animal kingdom in his restless canvases that are bursting with life and history.

By comparison the *Beijing November Painting Exhibition* was significantly more modest in its approach. The Beijing painters express life through a certain aloofness. They worship pure art and disdain the social factor in art, while the Shanghai, Yunnan, Shanxi and Shenzhen groups take an opposite view and believe that art must deal directly with people. The Beijing artists are deeply concerned with self-perfection and inner purification, and oppose external expression. In seeking his own place in the world and his own will, Xia Xiaowan elevates them to the plane of religion, which gives his paintings a mystical cast. Shi Benming's drawings seem to be narrating an episode of a love story that the soul is telling itself.

Among young artists, there is a divergence of opinion concerning reason versus intuition, and even among the anti-reason schools there is divergence of opinion about the ultimate purpose of painting. This particular divergence can be summed up as follows: self expression versus anti-self expression; and individuality versus anti-individuality.

Another intuitive group deals with the pursuit of vanishing and emerging fantasies, but these fantasies lack the absurdity of Dali and the analysis of Freud. They are prototypical fantasies drawn from a misty, mysterious world. Their pursuit is not an attempt to explain a particular philosophy of life, or reveal personal secrets, but a means for the artist to express his temperament. Perhaps this medium is something of a protest against the prevailing mode of narrative or literary expression of the self.

In spite of their differences, all intuitive painters share one thing in common: mystery. This is primarily because they use abstract forms, but also due to the fact that the feelings and ideas they want to express — be they individual or universal — remain in an unknowable, confused state. In other cases, although the artist may have a clear goal and ultimate image in mind, because the creative process makes a point of being “unknowable,” the viewer has great difficulty grasping the real intentions behind the work.

3. Renewed concepts and behaviorism

1985 saw an unprecedented renewal of artistic concepts, one important step on the way to the modernisation of Chinese art. It first manifested itself in the realm of theory and criticism, and later became an object of attention for painters.

The renewal took several concrete forms:

1) A new emphasis on the value of the work done during the process of creation, and on the common will. In the past, artists also spoke of the process of creating a work of art. What was new was the idea that actual labor was involved as an integral part of the work. Several works of art, both paintings and sculptures, could be considered as a single work, or as part of a single work. As a result, the layout for the exhibition hall took on greater importance than the works themselves for, taken as a whole, they embodied the intentions of all the people involved. Other elements, such as audio, video and lighting played an important role as well.

2) Behaviorism. Based on the concept of creative work, the process of creation could be more important than the results, the atmosphere more important than the work. And since the result had already been foreseen in the planning, the result came first, and the cause later. This reversal of cause and effect is a form of behaviorism. Exhibitions of this sort would have their anticipated “effect,” which would at least amount to some form of stimulation.

3) Pop fever. The Robert Rauschenberg exhibition held in the China Art Gallery in Beijing was the most exciting foreign exhibition to be held in the country for many years. As Chinese artists were looking for new ideas, while suffering from the narrow limits of permitted thought, the exhibition came as an important breakthrough. And even though the works were “old tricks” from the 1960s, in China’s special environment, they seemed very new.

While some artists want to discover new ways of traditional depiction, and enrich the artistic language, others want to renew the entire artistic vocabulary. For example, the former would discuss the best way to paint a vase, while the latter would replace the vase with a urinal. For the latter, the question is not a matter of choosing between a vase or a urinal, but the act of exchange itself. Chinese artists know that string, cardboard and paper boxes have been used too many times in the past, but they also know that oil paints have been used thousands of times before. Whether they are used too often or not depends on the need to narrate something, an inherent trait in a particular cultural setting.

UNDERCURRENTS

It is evident that the three areas we have explored above coincide with three major trends in contemporary art in the West. Is there anything uniquely Chinese here? Perhaps the fact that there is nothing Chinese to be found in the works of young artists in China today is in itself “uniquely Chinese.” Progress in art requires movements and trends: without movements there can be no development. But it should be remembered that art itself is not a movement, and that no movement necessarily produces great masters.

The unrestrained “importism” described above is an obvious outcome of China’s opening to the West, and may be destructive to some degree. To quote Clive Bell: Before a great renaissance of feelings takes place, there must first be a destructive movement that will act as a prelude to the emergence of new schools and great masters. But over time, the movements and trends will cause the disappearance of many artists and their works. The value of movements is that they affect the entire world of art, and not individual works. But they also produce many talented artists and fine works.

This aspect of the 1985 New Wave has inspired many young artists with a sense of tragedy and sacrifice.

Confronted with the highly influential traditions and trends of Western art that they are unable to adopt as their own, young artists in China respond with doubts about their own identity. With new concepts, nationalism, the vague ideal of perfect harmony between East and West and the unmitigating assault by Western culture on the ancient cultures of Asia — which leaves many holes in the dike and pushes the dike back — the only solution is to take action and create the highest possible values in art. Many young artists would like to build a perfect palace, but can they build it on a dike? In this situation, it would be better to be a stone and disappear in the flow.

While the Western artistic language draws on Eastern ideas to nourish and transcend itself, some young Chinese artists have given up the old pursuit of “drawing on the ancients to stimulate the modern” and actually go against

tradition — a tradition that in another cultural context would be perceived as something exquisite, while in China it is nothing but a burden.

Many young Chinese artists have a sense of impending doom, and fear that their artistic careers will end early. Some artists in the Zhejiang school compare finishing a work with dying. Self confidence and tragedy, impetuosity and sacrifice seem to be inevitable in the modern world. These painters want to be great artists, but they know that this may not be the right time for great artists.

For most young artists, the sense of tragedy and sacrifice is a positive force in a world of constant negation, reflecting the state of mind of those willing to play a minor role. To participate in world culture, one must make choices and take up the challenge. Although it may only be an attitude, the artists of the 1985 New Wave movement have had the courage to meet the challenge.

To do this, it is sometimes necessary to “import” ready-made forms. But this is not importing for the sake of importing. Rather, once something is imported, its value changes. And behind this attitude there is a question of personal choice. Thus the act of importing cannot be called wholesale imitation.

This phenomenon is part of a world trend, and has two components:

1. *The threat of self-understanding*

The rational nature of the 1985 New Wave does not derive solely from knowledge and cultural self examination, for there is a strong component of criticism as well. The awakening of reason begins with doubt. Is everything rational because it exists, or does everything exist because it is rational? Of course this question can never be answered. But what emerges, particularly in times of cultural ferment, is the question of what is human nature? For this reason, broad knowledge and objective analysis are critical tools for making judgements and choices in the world. Painters must also make judgements and choices, and thus the mysteries of the universe and the structure of time have been popular themes in art in recent years.

2. *The loss of self value and regression*

Value here refers to the value of human nature, or, in other words, judgement: to have the confidence to judge right and wrong in society, ways of human existence and man's place in the universe. The “detached,” “stupefied,” and “eccentric” figures in New Wave painting may have something to do with this attitude of detached judgement that is reflected in Ernest Cassier's statement: “People tend to take their own lives as the center of the world, and their own personal habits as universal standards. People must give up these illusions, pettiness and provinciality. As science and culture expand the frontiers of people's lives, people tend to lose their own powers of judgement. This sense of loss is in a sense a sign of progress in human thinking.”

The appearance of many paintings with themes that deal with time, space and the universe seems to suggest a conscious or unconscious desire to return to individual judgement. In some works, most of them rational, this desire is sublimated in visions that transcend the human race, the individual, society, and time and space. When it appears in more intuitive works, it is expressed through the way line, color and three-dimensional space swell, elongate and move about restlessly.

From out of the contradiction between doubt and the search for knowledge, between regression and negation, the search for values from different points of view creates a distinct quantity of works and phenomena with disparate and disassociated meanings and language, connotations and forms of expression. Out of their eagerness to expand the breadth of thought and depth of meaning reflected in their paintings, some artists pay insufficient attention to the breadth and depth of their artistic language, rashly falling into stereotyped patterns. But attaining uniqueness is not an easy thing. At times, for art's sake, artists may borrow ready-made forms from other artists. They suffer for this, and when others see these “scars” the artists are accused of “copying” or “imitating indiscriminately.” But this is a necessary process, and perhaps a form of sacrifice.

In sum, the 1985 New Wave came about as a result of the Chinese Communist Party's policy of opening China to the outside world. It represents a continuation and development of the spirit of the new culture movement in modern China, and is worthy of our close attention.

(Translated by Don J. Cohn)

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Gao Minglu is a respected art critic and a former editor of China's *Art* magazine. He currently lives in the United States.

CHINA'S NEW ART, POST-1989

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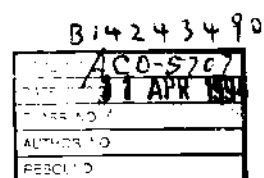
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