

Art and Artists in China since 1949

In this lavishly illustrated study, the scholar and critic Ying Yi brings a distinctly Chinese perspective to the development of art and artists in China since 1949. These have been years of dramatic change for China, and the art of this period is therefore of historical, political, and cultural interest, being first used to promote the revolutionary cause, later to question and criticize and, more recently, charting the changes in cultural and economic policy that have taken place since 1978. In the twenty-first century, Chinese art is diverse, distinctive, and highly prized in the global art market. Presented here in English translation for the first time, Yi's narrative opens up fresh questions about both the nature of contemporary art and the China of today.

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Introduction to the English Edition

Xiaobing Tang

The story of art in China since the mid-twentieth century, to those of us with an interest in following it, has become a rather familiar one through repeated telling. It is a story of many twists and turns, of constant changes and extraordinary developments, a complex course of events that is inextricably intertwined with the momentous political and social transformation in the People's Republic in recent memory. The basic plot of this fast-moving narrative is clear: Art in New China was subjected to tight political control and instrumentalism in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the late 1970s, with the ending of the violent Cultural Revolution and the onset of the Reform era, artists began to gain greater freedom in self-expression. The historic opening-up reached its peak in 1985 when a young generation of artists staged a modernist New Wave across the country. Entering the 1990s, idealism gave way to commercialism, and the rapid rise of the art market not only diversified the art field but also turned a Chinese brand of contemporary art into a global phenomenon. Consequently, art in China in the twenty-first century is both diverse and a big business, and as such it stimulates ongoing reflections on its identity and meaning.

This core narrative of opening-up underlies many an account of the development of art in China since 1949, when the People's Republic was founded. It is a narrative that lends itself to a prevalent understanding of recent Chinese cultural history as a liberating movement from ideological imposition to pragmatic reorientation, from utopian passions to secular desires. On an even grander scale, this narrative corroborates the analysis that the passing of the Cold War and its attendant age of ideology paved the way for a new round of capitalist, neoliberal globalization at the turn of the twenty-first century. The present volume by Ying Yi, ably translated from Chinese and amply illustrated, offers us another instance of this widely accepted narrative serving as a framework for explaining where contemporary Chinese art comes from. Its original title neatly highlights the cultural ramifications of a historic transition: From Heroic Hymns to Mundane Worlds.

Yet once we enter the volume and begin to follow the numerous artists, art movements, and works of art introduced in this brief history, we realize that the narrative of a systematic transformation is messier than a linear progression, propelled fitfully by intriguing details and digressions. Although the overarching story is able to account for many events and phenomena, there are also moments not fully addressed and connections underexplored. “A sad page” in this art history, as we will see, functions as a turning point and is related to a sudden suspension of “normal artistic creation and education.” We are not told what would constitute “normal” or “conventional” artistic practices in the given context, or why the unthinkable suspension to begin with. If tension between a meaningful narrative and lived experiences may be inherent to historical knowledge as generalization, such moments seem particularly productive in the present case and point to formidable conceptual challenges in the writing of a history of contemporary Chinese art.

One challenge, simply put, is to recognize the scope of what we need to narrate. A history of Chinese art since 1949, no matter how succinct it may be, will need to engage at least two divergent fields of art and their corresponding modes of cultural production. These two fields operate differently, each with its own discourse, targeted or imagined audience, institutional hierarchy, and mechanisms of exhibition and circulation. Informed by different social aspirations, each field endorses a mainstream art over the fringe or the subversive, decidedly promoting the former and contending with the latter. The contrast between these two distinct ways of defining and making art is striking, as can be seen from the profound differences in style and subject matter that Ying Yi’s narrative underscores between significant works from the 1950s and those from the 1980s and beyond. His discussion of how the national art exhibitions functioned as an influential institution and became the target of a youthful rebellion gives us a concrete example of the tug of war between a dominant art field and an emergent one.

Even if our interest is to rationalize the transition from one mode of cultural production to another, we enrich our understanding by investigating how both respond to a similar set of questions, and how they differ in their visions of art and artists. We avoid subscribing to a simplistic evolutionary logic when we grasp a paradigm shift as the introduction, in a moment of crisis, of a different question or principle that supersedes a previous concern or commitment. A history of contemporary Chinese art acquires greater explanatory power, in my view, when we look into and uncover how the field of art was configured and reconfigured over the course of half a century.

What makes this history fascinating, I would suggest, is precisely the fraught but symbiotic relationship between two different modes of cultural production. We can hardly think of another situation where a state-instituted, all-encompassing field of art would steadily reform itself and yield its institutional predominance to a market-driven alternative in such a condensed period of time. We see in China today an ecosystem where two differently constituted art fields coexist and adapt to each other creatively, fulfilling diverse demands and functions. If we do not limit ourselves with a purist lens, such as an abstract notion of capitalism or socialism, we will find there a truly multicultural condition. Art programs sponsored by the China Artists Association and its various branches, for instance, often have a public and socially affirmative orientation that is hardly the main pursuit of for-profit art galleries, although government institutions and private agencies frequently cooperate in organizing international biennales or local art fairs. Labeling one set of institutions in this case as official and the other as unofficial or independent may provide a handy classification, but it also conveys more of a value judgment than a patient analysis of their complex operations and interconnections.

By no means free of contentions, this ecosystem of coexistence generates anxiety as much as cynicism, but it also opens up space for unexpected hybridizations. As a result, the art scene in contemporary China presents an apparently paradoxical situation: Although criticisms and controversies abound, art flourishes as both creative activity and commerce, attracting tremendous talents and global attention. Art discourse, of which art history is a crucial part, reflects this edgy condition as well in that it is often animated and revisits with passion fundamental concepts and assumptions, such as the nature or purpose of art, the relevance of an artist's subjectivity, or the relationship between art and politics. Articulated in the process are not merely different aesthetic predilections or political beliefs but also different cultural traditions and imaginaries.

A second conceptual challenge in the writing about contemporary Chinese art has to do with the Cultural Revolution, an extraordinary period of history that is hard to contain in any unitary narratives, because the radical mass movement started by Mao Zedong in the 1960s sought to negate systematically what had come before it and then was itself systematically negated. How to understand the impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese society and culture remains a deeply sensitive topic, as the reform consensus, formed in the late 1970s, began with a repudiation of Cultural Revolution policies and practices and has since undergirded the development of contemporary China.

This reform consensus also informs Ying Yi's approach to contemporary art. Therefore, as we have mentioned, the Cultural Revolution is

referred to in his narrative as a “sad page in history,” when “there was almost no artistic creation in any sense of the term.” Yet the historian also observes that the sad moment was a time when “mass art activities were very popular, because the revolutionary movement required a great number of propaganda images.” Evidently art as a participatory, amateur-oriented practice was embraced as a necessary part of a populist revolution in culture. Against this background, we notice that the account in the following pages is centered on fine arts, in fact mostly on oil paintings by academically trained artists. This limited scope mirrors the fact that the development of art in China in the Reform era was set in motion with a radical redirection of artistic energy and imagination.

Related to the points made earlier, a third challenge comes from the task of devising a fresh language in assessing contemporary Chinese art. This implies the need not only to interpret claims and self-presentations made by artists or other interested parties but also to interrogate the critical vocabulary employed in historiography. While discussing why the search for a pure visual language by a group of modernist artists received scant attention in the 1990s, Ying Yi remarks insightfully on how familiarity with one critical tradition may keep a critic from appreciating a new type of art. As his main purpose is to narrate the intellectual and conceptual developments underlying contemporary Chinese art, the historian presents many events, schools, and movements that constitute historical progression. The result is an eventful history, but it is largely narrated in the language of the object of its presentation, varied and evolving as that language may be. We observe this feature in many other writings on the same topic, because they share the tendency to affirm contemporary art in its own terms.

A good case in point here is the notion of “modern art.” As the coded self-designation of youthful art movements in the 1980s, the term posited art as fundamentally driven by formal innovation and self-expression, thereby signaling a resolute departure from the established system, in particular the realist tradition. Its broad appeal at the time owed a great deal to the general enthusiasm, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, for the modernization project now firmly on the national agenda. A forceful argument was made in this context that modernization necessarily calls for a modern, or even more narrowly a modernist, culture and mind-set. Adopting this value-laden term indiscriminately to celebrate a “turn to modern art” in the mid-1980s, however, one runs the risk of generalizing a specific understanding and disregarding other compelling visions of a modern art. For there were not only the earnest practitioners of modernist art in Shanghai and other urban centers in the 1920s and

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1930s but also generations of committed artists who embraced realist art as the most efficacious in heralding a modern society. The creation of a genuine modern art, indeed, has been a central objective for many Chinese artists in the entire twentieth century and beyond.

It was also in the 1980s, as we may recall, that two pioneering accounts of Chinese art since 1949, by Joan Lebold Cohen and Ellen Johnston Laing, respectively, appeared in English within one year of each other. In the mid-1990s, we saw the publication of Julia F. Andrews's award-winning study of *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, followed by Michael Sullivan's magisterial *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*. A monumental achievement in recent years was the translation and publication of *A History of Art in Twentieth-Century China* by Chinese scholar Lü Peng in 2010.

The energetic and fast-changing art scene in China since the 1990s, along with the growing international prominence of Chinese contemporary art, has attracted considerable scholarly interest, both in China and abroad, to the more colorful post-Cultural Revolution era. The publication of Ying Yi's volume in English ought to be a timely event. It invites us to rethink continuity in the history of art discourse and production in China since 1949 and explore it, suggests the author, as an unbroken or unbreakable river. Moving further away from that historical turning point, we should be in a position better to appreciate changes and formations only adequate historical distance will reveal.