

OPENING THE FLOODGATE: THE FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION OF AMERICAN ART IN
CHINA'S REFORM ERA

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the first major exhibition of American art in China's reform era, *The Exhibition of Important Original Works from the American Paintings Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts* (referred to as *The Exhibition*) in 1981. As a result of the Cultural Exchange Agreement signed in consequence of the official normalization of the diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1979, *The Exhibition* is considered a major event showing China's decisive attempt to open up and to integrate with the rest of the world in the post-Cultural Revolution period. As the climax of cultural exchanges during the early reform era and a cultural carnival in its own right, *The Exhibition* provoked heated discussions and discourses that lasted a long time. The works on display and the textual information in the catalogue also profoundly impacted contemporary Chinese art and the later art movement in the 1980s.

Chapter One introduces the sociopolitical environment and newly launched cultural policies in China in the early post-Mao era, which together made the in-depth cultural communications between the two countries possible. The following two chapters explain how the American organizer put together the exhibition, and how they exploited the crisis that arose when the Chinese officials objected to abstract paintings, to reiterate the democratic principles represented and embodied in the paintings. The next two chapters examine the Chinese professional audiences' reaction of and refraction on the exhibition. The lasting influence eventually partially contributed to the intellectual movement in art in the 1980s. The structure and argument of this thesis center on the creation and reception of a cultural contact zone – *The Exhibition* – where cultural communications were mediated between unequal power relations who held different political and diplomatic missions. It is divided into six chapters: (1) Introduction: The First Major Exhibition of American Art in China's Reform Era, (2) Background: Sociopolitical

Context and Cultural Environment, (3) The Art Exhibition as America's Self-Representation and Autoethnography, (4) Anti-Assimilation: When the Crisis of Potential Cancellation Happened, (5) Cultural Shock – Or Not So Shocked: The Domestic Responses, and (6) Aftermath and Conclusion: A Questionable Modernist Movement.

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Introduction: The First Major Exhibition of American Art in China's Reform Era

The post-Mao era starting in late 1976 was no less dynamic than the Cultural Revolution, although in a very different way. The political wrestling between conservatives and reformists seemed to be in a logjam until reform was eventually launched under Deng Xiaoping's leadership. As a result of the reformist policies and a more relaxed cultural environment, people in China started to have access to more foreign art, especially that from the non-socialist countries, as part of the overall frequented cultural communications and contacts with the rest of the world. Some of the larger exhibitions included *The Exhibition of Romanian Paintings From the 19th & 20th Century* (1977), *The Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century* (1978), *Modern Japanese Painting Exhibition* (1979), *American Pictorial Posters and Illustrations Exhibition* (1980), and *Finland Modern Woodblock Exhibition* (1981).¹ The climax of cultural exchange and communication through art exhibitions during the first few years of the reform era happened in the late autumn of 1981. *The Exhibition of Important Original Works from the American Paintings Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts* (referred to as *The Exhibition*) was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to fulfill the request from the United States International Communication Agency, which is part of the State Department.² It took place in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing from September 1st to September 30th, 1981, and then moved to Shanghai Museum between October 20th and November 19th, 1981.

¹ Maria Galikowski, "Chapter 4: The Discovery of 'the Self': A New Era for Chinese art, 1976-1984," *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), 184.

"Catalogues of Early Foreign Art Exhibitions in China," *Asian Art Archives*, accessed March 10, 2015 <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionFolder/748>.

² In the catalogue book, the English title for *The Exhibition* is *American Paintings From The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. However, the Chinese title is *Boshidun Bowuguan Meiguo Minghua Yuanzuo Zhan*, which is literally translated as *The Exhibition of Important Original Works From the American Paintings Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*. Considering the emphasis on the importance and originality is significant to the project and to the perception and reception of *The Exhibition* in China, I decided to use the translated title as shown here and in the rest of the thesis.

This diplomatic project in art was realized by and carried out under the Cultural Exchange Agreement, as a result of the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations dated January 1, 1979. President Ronald Reagan gave his greetings and expressed his wishes that this reciprocal exhibition will let Chinese people “become familiar with American Life,” responding to China’s previous exhibition in San Francisco of ancient archaeological finds which “make American people know Chinese culture.”³ The State Department believed that “creating cultural links and displaying art ... would ‘tell America’s story.’”⁴ The John Moors Cabot Curator of American Paintings, Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., was the chief curator for the show. Accompanied by Jan Fontein, Curator of Asian Art, and Kenworth Moffett, Curator of 20th Century Art, Stebbins decided on 70 paintings which were divided into four periods to show the evolutionary phases of American history and people’s life, as well as the history of American painting.

The formation of *The Exhibition* was indebted to the reform-minded Chinese authorities in support of launching the reformist campaigns such as the “Four Modernizations” and to promote the new image of China as being open to and cooperative with the rest of the world in the new era. Designed by the American curatorial team and guided by the State Department, *The Exhibition* became a “contact zone,” which is defined by Mary Louise Pratt as a social space where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”⁵ Deliberately wrapped in an autoethnographic expression and enhanced by the unequal power relations in economic, cultural, and other aspects

³ *Catalogue Book of The Exhibition of Important Original Works from the American Paintings Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, 1981, 5.

⁴ Meredith Palmer, “When public policy made a difference: American paintings in China in 1981,” *The Washington Post*, December 23, 2011, accessed March 10, 2015 http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/when-public-policy-made-a-difference-american-paintings-in-china-in-1981/2011/11/14/gIQAMYrFDP_story.html.

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, “Chapter 1: Introduction: Criticism in the Contact Zone,” in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (U.K.:Taylor & Francis, 2003), 4.

between the exhibitor and the audiences, *The Exhibition* successfully delivered clear Cold War ideological and diplomatic messages which were to incorporate China into “The American Century.”⁶ Under the cultural shock and influx, as well as suffering from a domestic cultural vacuum, the post-Cultural Revolution China absorbed the information in an eager and unselective manner. Reflected in art, *The Exhibition* and its cultural communicational contemporaries, such as other foreign art exhibitions, foreign film weeks, and foreign book expos, together contributed to the China-specific “Modernist” Movement in the 1980s.

⁶ The phrase is excerpted from the quote, “The result was a remarkable tight network of people who worked alongside the Agency to promote an idea: that the world needed a *pax Americana*, a new age of enlightenment, and it would be called ‘The American Century,’” which describes the CIA’s mission in the Cultural Cold War. Frances S. Saunders, “Introduction,” in *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 2.

Chapter 1: Background: Sociopolitical Context and Cultural Environment

Mao Zedong's death on September 9th 1976 ended an era – an era of a collective hypomania, inscribed with Mao's cult, persona, ideology, and ego. Lodged in the stainless crystal coffin for eternal preservation and condolence, Mao left a wounded nation which was without normal life, sustainable agricultural or industrial production. It was time for change. The former “capitalist roader” Deng Xiaoping, who had been ousted from the government multiple times due largely to his pro-Western attitudes, reemerged at the center of power and, thereby, obtained the opportunity to propose and implement reformist policies. Reform was not smooth, and Deng was far from an idealized savior of the land and people, but nonetheless, the reformist policies opened the floodgate in the gigantic dam that had previously enclosed the nation for decades, and from then on, foreign technology, culture, and thoughts entered China.

As one of the early diplomatic projects in art under the Cultural Exchange Agreement between China and the United States, *The Exhibition* was conceived not only with support of an improved bond between the two countries, but also, maybe more decisively, the specific intentions of the two individual sides. On China's side, as *The Exhibition* became a carnival of art and a spot of cultural tourism, but perhaps more importantly, the decision to hold *The Exhibition* at China's most prestigious exhibition venues, signaled the triumph of the reformist leaders by visualizing the executive power's recognition and appreciation of the West, as well as Western “modernity” and “modernization. Chinese policy makers intended to use art and culture to evoke the “awareness of modernness” in society to eventually accomplish overall economic prosperity and nationwide modernization in all aspects; unlike the previous era, the executive authority of the reform era cared about China's international image as being open and

cooperative, so they were pleased to have the presence of Western art in China as a showcase of the Chinese government's open-mindedness.

Cultural policies dramatically changed during the early years of the reform era. Two changes in particular helped pave the road for *The Exhibition* and other cultural communications to happen. First of all, Deng Xiaoping's cultural policies targeted at Mao and those more loyal to Mao, even though at first glance the launch of the Dengist cultural policies were not an iconoclastic; in other words, Mao's doctrines and policies were not straightforwardly disapproved of or criticized;⁷ neither did the policies dismantle the visual realizations and materializations of Mao's cult. However, the function of art and literature, positioned as a relatively minor discourse in national politics and policy making, was exploited and weaponized in wrestling with the other camp during the first few years of the post-Mao period because neither side was willing to directly criticize or condemn the opponent's mistakes in policy making except for the "minor issues" of arts and literatures which could loom large and be pursued further.⁸ Hua Guofeng, successor of Mao, and the second chairman of China, brought up the famous "Two Whatever's" in February, 1977: "Whatever decisions were made by Chairman Mao, we will resolutely defend. Whatever instructions were given by Chairman Mao, we must unwaveringly follow forever."⁹ Seen as an obstacle to Deng Xiaopeng's own political

⁷ Mao Zedong's talk at the Yan'an Forum, "Writers and artists concentrate everyday phenomena, typify the contradictions and struggles within them and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their own situation ... To sum up, the creative labor of revolutionary cultural workers transforms the raw material of everyday life into literature and art that serve the people." Mao Zedong, 'Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shan de jianghua' ('Talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art'), in *Mao Zedong Xuanji (Selected works of Mao Zedong)*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991), 866. English translation in *Mao Zedong on Art and Literature* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1960), 19. 2

⁸ Shen Kuiyi and Julia F. Andrews, "Light before Dawn," *Light before Dawn: Unofficial Chinese Art 1974-1985*, (Hong Kong: Asia Society, 2013), 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

ideas and evoking dissatisfaction among the intellectuals, this slogan was questioned and challenged by a series of discussions and articles initiated by Deng and his followers.

Besides terminating the absolute obedience to Mao and his doctrines, the other thing targeted by the reformist leaders was the image of the West, which had been demonized during Mao's era. The eventual realization of *The Exhibition* and its reception from the audiences, both professional and ordinary, would have been a daydream without a changing relationship between China and the United States. In return, *The Exhibition* was both the result of the changed image of the United States, but also a force that helped further the process of understanding the West. This refers not only to the formal diplomatic relationship, but also to the changing perception of the U.S. among people in China through a changing strategy of cultivation and image making, as well as a changing impression and image of China in the United States. During Mao's regime, the United States had been portrayed as the greatest evil in the world, and the idea, through direct teaching and implanting a sense of crisis as well as the consciousness of victimization, was thoroughly integrated into the collective mind of Chinese people – obviously, an exhibition showing American paintings in the most prestigious art venues would not be possible or even reasonable under such collective hatred of the demonized United States and nationwide hatred.

For example, in Wu Wenguang's documentary film *1966, My Time in the Red Guards* (1993), an interviewee recalls his experience as a student during the Cultural Revolution,

In the rear of our classroom is a world map. South of our country, throughout the places like Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, Imperialist America has established its military bases, which form a semi-circular encirclement around China. In the West, countries like India and Turkey have Imperialist American military bases... At the time, we believed that

China was the revolutionary center of the entire world, encircled by Imperialism and Socialist Imperialism, and there would be a destined war.¹⁰

Deng Xiaoping, a “capitalist roader” during the Cultural Revolution, was determined to reform the image of United States, and, at the same time, propagate China’s openness to the world. During the process of altering the image of the United States, the government-controlled mouthpieces had to be careful not to give the West too much credit, because otherwise the Chinese would question the properness and credibility of the specific doctrine, doubt China’s own political system, and feel uncomfortable with the current leaders’ “antirevolutionary” attitude.¹¹ Deng’s efforts in reforms and openness eventually led to his 1978 visit to the United States and the diplomatic normalization between the two countries the following year. Thus, Deng carefully balanced between his willingness to open up China and the political stability and legitimacy of the Communist Party. This balancing act was especially crucial after all the cultural agreements were signed, which would have some access to American culture.

The second feature that distinguished Dengist cultural policies and his strategies from Mao’s, was that Mao Zedong believed that art and literature had such tremendous power the rulers had to tightly control it, while Deng placed much less weight on the importance of art and literature. Instead of considering them powerful and thus useful, Deng saw art and literature only in terms of their communicative function and utilitarian values, only to the extent of supplementary statuses to enhance other sociopolitical and socioeconomic policies. Hence, *The Exhibition*, with its origins in the United States, its scale and official backing expressed to the domestic population – especially the intellectual or at least the literate – the nationwide goal and

¹⁰ *1966, My Time in the Red Guards*, directed by Wu Wenguang, (Wu Documentary Studio, 1993)

¹¹ Li Jing, “A Balancing Act: The People’s Daily, 1979-1989,” in *China’s America: The Chinese View the United States, 1900-2000*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 122.

determinism to adopt a pro-Western stance, as well as being a sign of a changing sociopolitical milieu.

Under the cultural doctrine of Mao's regime – to serve the people – as many ordinary people as possible acquired basic painting skills, and created a mass visual movement that sought through pictorial language to denounce and humiliate the “antirevolutionary,” as well as to affirm, elevate, and divinize the revolutionary leader, namely Mao.¹² In Deng's case, as Andrews and Shen argue, “he considered art and culture far less significant to the nation than did Mao, and his policies were no less idiosyncratic.”¹³

It appears that he (Deng) loosened central control of the arts when it served his other strategic purposes and tightened it again when a concession to hardliners in the party leadership was needed in exchange for support in more critical political arenas. In general, art policy was left in the hands of party arts leaders, where conservatives and reformers, those more loyal to Mao and Hua, and those more supportive of Deng, fought their own battles. The careers of artists and arts leaders would rise and fall arbitrarily in the wake of these unpredictable events.¹⁴

In China, the highest authority, namely the emperors in the dynastic history and the Party's highest authority of People's Republic of China, is habitually considered to have a mandate from heaven. This “mandate” is not a superstitious cult used to fool the less educated, but a deeply rooted belief, which might stem from fear, respect, or “the Doctrine of the Mean” (*zhongyong*) that inhibits people from speaking. Therefore, the recognized highest authority of the government not only conducts administrative duties and exercises governmental authority, but also enjoys an overall and well-rounded authority as if he or (in extremely rare cases) she has superior knowledge of everything. Following the highest authority's words, and quoting the words as defense in arguments and articulations, would help one to win a politically and

¹² Ibid., 18-19.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 24.

ideologically correct stance. Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an speech on literature and art had been orthodoxy for creative works and artistic productions for more than three decades. Now, in order to weaken the legitimacy and to undermine the absolute authority of Mao's words, there should be a successor doctrine, given by the new highest authority which Deng's provided when he addressed at the Fourth Congress of Literary and Art Workers in the fall of 1979. In his speech, he condemned Mao's previous doctrine by emphasizing the Four Modernizations, which includes modernization of industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology. Deng's new emphasis not only showed the secondary status of cultural products which were only to enhance the modernization in other aspects, but also called for the awareness of modernization and modernity.

The destiny of our country depends on this great undertaking. The masses and cadres on all fronts should serve as activists in emancipating thought, promoting stability and unity, defending the unification of our mother land, and accomplishing the Four Modernizations. *The sole criterion for deciding the correctness of all work should be whether that work is helpful or harmful to the accomplishment of the Four Modernizations* (italics mine).¹⁵

First and foremost, Deng's address shows his primary aim was to launch the economic reforms that could, hopefully, bring China prosperity and wealth.¹⁶ This indicates a shifting interest from the cultural to the economic, and a changing focus from the ideological matters to the praxis and effects of whether the cultural products further modernization or not.¹⁷ "The sole criterion for deciding the correctness of all work should be whether that work is helpful or harmful to the accomplishment of the Four Modernizations" is obviously result-oriented, instead of mission-centered or detail-focused, which is to say, before the aftermath influence and effect show,

¹⁵ Deng Xiaoping, "Congratulatory Message to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists," in *Chinese literature for the 1980s: the Fourth Congress of Writers & Artists*, edited by Howard Goldblatt, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1982), 9.

¹⁶ Maria Galikowski, "Chapter 4: The Discovery of 'the Self.' A New Era for Chinese art, 1976-1984," in *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

regulations and censorships are, based on Deng's doctrines, not supposed to play a guiding or deciding role. The good effects are expected to flow from the creative ideas. Deng's doctrine shows an open environment for creative works and artistic production to some extent. On the other hand, the emphasis or even overemphasis on modernization, which is more of an economic term, and its deciding role in the fate of art and literary works, led to the fever over, and the confusing ideas of, modernization, modernism and modernity. In trying to keep with Deng's call for "modernization," the artists also tried to make works that looked "modern," and one reference for being "modern" was to mimic the art from the more developed foreign countries, namely European countries and the United States. This reflects in the cultural workers' response to and perception of foreign, especially Western, art, as well as their own creation and recreation upon seeing and learning from the outside resources. Again, in order to put forward his own words with less political interference, Deng quotes Mao's and Lenin's words, and reiterates their words to further legitimize his own.

We must adhere to Comrade Mao Zedong's principle that art and literature should serve the people, particularly the worker-peasant-soldier masses, and follow his policies of "letting a hundred flowers bloom," "weeding out the old to bring forth the new," and "making foreign and ancient things serve China." The unhampered development of different styles in creative works and free discussion of divergent viewpoints and schools of thought in literary and art theories should all be encouraged. Lenin once said: "[In literature] it is absolutely necessary to guarantee that writers have ample room for individual creation and inclination, and ample room for different ideas, imagination, forms, and contents." Geared to reach the common goal of realizing the Four Modernizations, writers and artists should broaden the horizons of their work; their creative thinking, themes, and techniques should change and adapt to time and tide, and should be able to plow new ground. Writers and artists should prevent and overcome the tendency of monotonous formulism and jargonism.¹⁸

While "(to) prevent and overcome the tendency of monotonous formulism and jargonism" is to criticize the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, quoting Mao's words, accompanied with

¹⁸ Deng Xiaoping, 10.

Lenin's words as affirmation, "letting a hundred flowers bloom," "weeding out the old to bring forth the new," and "making foreign and ancient things serve China," Deng subtly but clearly approves the use of styles other than socialist realism, the use of subjects other than the highly formulated few, the use of the previously disgraced "ancient things," and the use of the decadent "foreign things," namely styles from Japan and the West. Still, the openness is part of the political game, as pointed out by Perry Link,

The slogan "let a hundred flowers bloom," so often invoked perfunctorily, sometimes does express the genuine convictions not only of writers and artists, but apparently of some of their protectors in high places as well—at least at times. Cultural variety, in this view, will be an integral part of ideal Communism when it arrives; at least some tolerance of variety is, moreover, necessary in negotiating the tortuous road to achieve that ideal society.¹⁹

Unlike the industrial, economic and technological cooperation between China and the more developed countries, a showcase of foreign art would certainly not be able to contribute to any actual "modernity" or benefits of modernity in the form of either an improved living condition or an increased income. However, a visual event, accompanied with reportages and discussions in media, intellectual circles and academia, would advance the consciousness-raising mission. In this case, the consciousness-raising effects consisted of two parts: the legitimization and victory of the reformist group and their goals, and the Pro-Western modernization-consciousness which, in the long run, would guide the social milieu toward a rather singular goal of development through pursuit of Western modernity.

¹⁹ Perry Links, "The Limits of Cultural Reform in Deng Xiaoping's China," *Modern China*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Apr., 1987): 126 accessed March 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189151>.

Chapter 2: The Art Exhibition as America's Self-Representation and Autoethnography

The American government's support for organizing a magnificent exhibition and sending the best works by its very renowned artists to the exhibition met the goals of the Chinese government and the organizer in several ways. In one sense, it was deferential, an act of political recognition of the Chinese government, given that it was the first large-scale, top-tier, officially-organized art exhibition that resulted from the diplomatic normalization. By the same token, Chinese government successfully convinced the domestic population of the international recognition through the manifestation. At the same time, the high quality of the artwork sent to China was explicitly intended for another purpose: to demonstrate the triumph of America's cultural, industrial and social modernization achieved through democratic principles after her long history of struggling for independence, social alienations and other problems like those in China, and therefore, implicitly to show an "alternative" or "possible" China, if China embodies the ideology that was embodied in the artworks.²⁰

Curator Pablo Lafuente categorizes exhibitions into "a diagram with four nodes: exhibitions of contextualized objects; exhibitions of contextualized subjects; exhibitions of decontextualized subjects; and exhibitions of decontextualized objects."²¹ The (de)contextualization of the subject decides the preliminary expectation that the organizer wants the audiences to hold before entering the exhibition space. The (de)contextualization of the "object," or the exhibited, determines whether or not its presence is in fact "an act of representation."²² *The Exhibition* was obviously leaning towards the far corner where contextualized subject and contextualized object

²⁰ The structure and argument of this paragraph is largely inspired by Julia F. Andrews' "Japanese Oil Paintings in the First Chinese National Fine Arts Exhibition of 1929 and the Development of Asian Modernism."

²¹ Pablo Lafuente, "Introduction: From the Outside In – 'Magiciens de la Terre' and Two Histories of Exhibitions," in *Making Art Global (Part II)*, edited by Lucy Steeds, edited by Charles Esche and Mark Lewis, (London: Afterall Books, 2013), 17.

²²Pablo Lafuente, 13.

intersect, because in terms of the subject, or purpose, *The Exhibition* was clearly a political product, while in terms of the object, or the paintings, they were to assist the viewers' understanding of the texts and American history. The heavier the contextualization is, arguably, the exhibited works are more of a representation of a larger idea behind, such as the historical background, instead of a presentation of the works' own agency. In other words, the exhibited works function more like illustrations which assist the viewers to comprehend the texts and context. Indeed, on the one hand, *The Exhibition* was an art exhibition by all means; on the other hand, it was a survey book with illustrations telling the nation's history and announcing the statement of ideology.

This exhibition included 70 paintings, all of which were chosen for how they fit the mission of letting the Chinese audiences "familiarize [themselves] with America and American life." *The Exhibition* consisted of four parts, each section showing a different phase of American history, as well as the history of American paintings. The first part "From European Settlements to American Revolutionary War, 1620-1774" consisted of four works: John Smibert's *John Turner* (1737), Joseph Blackburn's *Jonathan Simpson* (date unknown), John Singleton Copley's *Mrs. Richard Skinner* (1772) and *The Reverend Thomas Cary of Newburyport* (1773).²³ This part served as a light prelude for the later sections. All four paintings are portraits commissioned by wealthy merchants and their families. In the major article, Stebbins emphasizes the hardships of the life of ordinary American people during the colonial period and their love for art and aesthetics – intentionally or unintentionally, a very proletarian statement which easily connects to Chinese official writings on the revolutionary history. Stebbins writes that the far-from-perfect painting techniques and pictorial qualities reflect the amateur nature of local artists who, despite

²³ *Catalogue*, 36-43.

their lack of European academic training, created works for the residents of the new land. Like the canonic teaching materials in the American institutional education, John Singleton Copley is regarded as the best of his contemporaries. Evidently, compared to the stiffness in previous portraits, Copley's characters, which are looming against the dark background, convey a more natural posture and facial expression. Nevertheless, although Copley later went to England, Stebbins feels obligated to point out that Copley supported the American pursuit of independence through revolution, and Stebbins even argues that Copley's painting skills, although they were later further improved in England, lost the very original local American flavor and became mediocre.²⁴ The paintings – namely the singular genre of commission, the lack of painting skills, and the emphases on jewels and details of the clothes, accompanied with elaborated historical background on the socioeconomic state of the artists and the patrons – represent the “America's story” of hardship and adventures in the new land during the colonial period.

The second part “From American Revolutionary War to Civil War, 1774-1861” included 23 paintings.^{25,26} During this period, the subjects expanded and became diversified, while art practice and art education were no longer restricted to a few artists and artisans. This expansion

²⁴ Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr, “A History of American Paintings,” *Catalogue*, 9-12.

“John Singleton Copley,” *Catalogue*, 40-43.

²⁵ *Catalogue*, 44-89.

²⁶ These paintings were Gilbert Stuart's *Mrs. John Gore* (1815), Benjamin West's *The Stolen Kiss* (1819), Washington Allston's *Donna Mencina in the Robbers' Cavern* (1815), John Vanderlyn's *Niagara Falls from Table Rock* (1801-1802), James Peale's *A Porcelain Bowl with Fruit* (1820), John Quidor's *A Battle Scene from Knickerbocker's History of New York* (1838), Alfred Jacob Miller's *Beating a Retreat* (1842), James Goodwyn Clonney's *In the Cornfield* (1844), Thomas Cole's *Sunset in the Catskills* (1841), Erastus Salisbury Field's *Miss Margaret Gilmore* (1840), Andrew L. von Wittkamp's *Black Cat on a Chair* (between 1850 and 1875), George Henry Durrie's *Winter Landscape: Gathering Wood* (1859), Jacob Eichholtz's *An Incident of the Revolution* (1831), Thomas Birch's *The Landing of William Penn* (1850), Thomas Doughty's *Fishing By a Waterfall* (1835-1840), Asher B. Durand's *The Babbling Brook* (1851), J.D. Bunting's *View of Darby, Pennsylvania, after the Burning of Lord's Mill* (between 1840 and 1850), an unknown artist's *Daniel Webster at His Farm* (1840-1845), an unknown artist's *Watermelon* (1855), an unknown artist's *A Street in Winter: Evening* (between 1860 and 1865), George Tirrell's *View of Sacramento, California, from across the Sacramento River* (between 1855 and 1860), Fitz Hugh Lane's *New York Harbor* (1850), and William Aiken Walker's *Dollarfish and Sheepshead* (1860).

signified a growing national consciousness and developed economy in the newly established country. In terms of subject matter, the emerging circulation and popularity of landscape painting is given special attention in the article by Stebbins; more interestingly, a few amateur “farmers’ paintings” are included.

Introduced in Stebbins’ article, Thomas Cole is the star among the landscape painters for not only his refined painting techniques and but also his deep feelings toward the nature of his nation. Here, Thomas Cole’s painting, accompanied with Stebbins’ interpretation, goes along with W.T.J. Mitchell’s words, “Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package,”²⁷ WTJ Mitchell claims, “Landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism.”²⁸ He further argues, “Before all these secondary representations, however, landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are put there by the physical transformation of a place in landscape gardening and architecture, or found in a place formed, as we say, ‘by nature.’”²⁹ This meaning making process is realized through conquering, taming and cultivating nature. Like Thomas Cole’s *Sunset in the Catskills* (1841), which depicted an untouched land – the “nature” – that is, according to the writer(s) of the caption(s), hoped to escape the rapid industrialization.

Daniel Webster at His Farm (between 1845 and 1850) and *Watermelon* (1855), both by anonymous artists, and Andrew L. von Wittkamp’s *Black Cat on a Chair* (between 1850 and 1875) are among the so-called “farmers’ paintings” or amateur paintings. In contrast to the

²⁷ WTJ Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” *Landscape and Power*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

amateur-skilled painting professionals of the colonial period who painted under the wealthy elites' commissions, the amateur painters during this period were amateur in the way that painting was more like a hobby. In the caption for *Daniel Webster at His Farm* (between 1845 and 1850), the lack of skills is pointed out, which evidently shows the self-motivation and zeal in the artistic production because the painter is not a professional who received professional education and lived by painting. Also, the caption writer gives a detailed description of Daniel Webster's biography and his plain attire which is often worn by a rural gentleman, recalling his efforts in the abolition of slavery and avoiding warfare. Therefore, the painting represents an ordinary rural person's respect to a politician who cares about the most repressed and evilly treated people and at the same time displays plain and down-to-earth taste. Whether intentionally or not, this caption and its emphasis resonate with the history of revolutionary and proletarian folk art in China.

The third part "The Maturation Period of American Paintings, 1861-1913" consisted of 24 works.³⁰³¹ Compared to the first two parts, the text for the third part deploys a more decentralized approach in which Stebbins tries to distribute equal length of text to each school and different selected artists. The increased frequency in name dropping makes it more difficult for the readers of the catalogue to memorize one or two representatives quickly, but leads to an impression of a

³⁰ *Catalogue*, 90-139.

³¹ These works were Régis François Gignoux' *Sunset in a Swamp* (between 1855 and 1865), David Gilmore Blythe's *Battle of the Gettysburg* (1863), James Abbott McNeil Whistler's *Symphony in Red* (between 1867 and 1870), George Inness' *Elms in Summer* (1868), George Cochran Lambdin's *Vase of Flowers* (1873), William Holbrook Beard's *The Wreckers* (1874), Martin Johnson Heade's *Newburyport Marshes* (ca. 1870) and *Passion Flowers and Hummingbirds* (ca. 1865), Albert Bierstadt's *The Ambush* (between 1870 and 1875), John George Brown's *Tuckered Out: The Shoeshine Boy* (between 1875 and 1900), William Morris Hunt's *Self Portrait* (1879), John F. Peto's *Pots and Pans* (ca. 1880), William Merritt Chase's *Still Life: Fish* (ca. 1900), John Singer Sargent's *Edith, Lady Playfair* (1884) and *The Master and His Pupils* (1914), Winslow Homer's *The Lookout: "All's Well"* (1896), Frank Weston Benson's *Gertrude* (1899), Maurice Predegast's *Lady with a Red Sash* (ca. 1900), Mary Cassatt's *Margot Embracing Her Mother* (1902), William McGregor Paxton's *The Nude* (1915), John Sloan's *Flowers in Spring* (date unknown), Willard Leroy Metcalf's *The First Snow* (1906), Childe Hassam's *Bathing Pool, Appledore* (1907), and Rockwell Kent's *Maine Coast, Winter* (1909).

lavishly flowering environment encouraging different schools to emerge in the art world and to compete in the market with each other. Again, paintings do not have their own agencies but are used as illustrations and representations to tell the history. The article for this part starts with a brief description of the time following the Civil War; America ended its phase as an agricultural society and quickly became industrialized, resulting in class divisions and social alienation.³² Under the social changes and the new phase, new discourses in the art market and in art practice emerged.

The text of the third part starts with landscape paintings as a continuation from Cole's era. After briefly introducing a few artists specializing in landscape and still life paintings, Stebbins jumps to John Singer Sargent, James Abbott McNeil Whitsler, Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer. Homer is crowned as "the last great American landscape painter" by Stebbins. Homer's *The Loukout: "All's Well"* (1896) is used as the cover page for the catalogue, which shows its comparative significance among its contemporaries and in the entire history of American painting. In the caption accompanied with the painting, Homer is described as a person who "is often considered to be the greatest American artist of the nineteenth century"³³ Homer is said to be different from his contemporaries because instead of showing bourgeoisie interests and pandering to the market which still favors landscape, portraits, and other more decorative forms, Homer, as a former reporter and illustrator for *Harper* during the Civil War, endures sense of historical mission and social responsibility. Therefore, according to the caption, Homer employs a majestic style to eulogize the ordinary fishermen, and in the process his works become deeper and more profound.³⁴

³² Stebbins, 18.

³³ *Catalogue*, 120.

³⁴ *Catalogue*, 120.

Two of John Singer Sargent's works *Edith, Lady Playfair* (1884) and *The Master and His Pupils* (1914) are selected for the exhibition, and though Stebbins treats Sargent as a "true master", he is also seen as leaning more towards "bourgeoisie" interests than a figure such as Homer. In the introduction of the artist and in the caption, the writer focuses more on the techniques, such as how Sargent captures the texture of the fabric, how he uses one stroke of white pigment to brilliantly illustrate a diamond ring, and how his sophisticated landscape shows a tradition of French Impressionism. Interestingly, the caption picks an "escutcheon" of Sargent that he once showed *Madame X* (Madame Pierre Gautreau) (1884) at a French Salon, just prior to the woman's marriage scandal. In the introduction, Stebbins writes, "He admitted that he had had enough of painting portraits to the wealthy, but he continued for the decent payments – during the heyday of his artistic career, one portrait could be priced as high as 5,000 dollars."³⁵

That *The Exhibition* makes a direct opposition between these artists and points out moments of social alienation is both intriguing and unexpected. On the one hand, oppositions show diversity. Defined as the "period of maturation" in a "industrialized society," unlike the preceding two periods during which relatively synchronized and singular interests and demands could be spread society-wide, seemingly conflicting interests coexist for different audiences. On the other hand, more intriguingly, "to eulogize the ordinary fishermen," and to "bear sense of historical mission and social responses" are, at least textually, valued higher than the capitalist interests and free market. Maybe it is only a way to address the hierarchy of genres of paintings – as in historical paintings are above landscape paintings and portraits. However, Sargent, bearing a "sense" of historical mission, depicts ordinary people. Moreover, this absolutely fits the mainstream ideology of the Chinese government and is easily liked.

³⁵ *Catalogue*, 116.

The fourth part is simply called “From 1913 to Present” in the text, without being defined as a synchronized period like its predecessors. Making 1913 the punctuation onto the timeline of American art is based on the thoroughly and profoundly influential exhibition, the 1913 *Armory Show: First International Exhibition of Modern Art in America*. Stebbins describes the *Armory Show*’s influence this way, “After the *Armory Show*, new phases and facets emerged in American painting. The artists realized the tremendous changes and progress in the world, in which the old-schooled and traditionalist thoughts were outdated.” This time, the American organizers and curators aimed to create a parallel between the 1913 *Armory Show* with 1981 *The Exhibition*. This part contained 19 paintings, which were further divided into two groups: the modernist and the other.³⁶³⁷ Unable to show as many recent paintings as wanted, a large portion of Stebbins’ writing discusses works of art not able to be exhibited at this time. For instance, Jasper Johns’ and Robert Rauschenberg’s postmodernist works, Andy Warhol’s and Roy Lichtenstein’s pop art, work from the Funk Art movement in California, Robert Smithon’s and Christo’s earth art. This reveals the organizers’ eager commitment to contemporary art. At the end, Stebbins’ concludes that,

All these movements together make the Americans interested in art. Many artists with eccentric and unusual concepts and methods have received sponsorships and supports, such as from exhibition planners, catalogue writers, and market specialists. Controversies and debates continue on, but obviously the Americans eventually learn to accept art and the concept of art. We have to not only respect

³⁶ *Catalogue*, 138-175.

³⁷ These paintings are George Benjamin Luks’ *King’s Chapel, Boston* (1923), Maurice Sterne’s *Green Apples* (date unknown), John Steuart Curry’s *Storm Over Lake Otsego* (1929), Edward Hopper’s *A Room in Brooklyn* (1932), Horace Pippin’s *Night Call* (1940), Marsden Hartley’s *Black Duck* (ca. 1949-41), Milton Avery’s *The Artist’s Daughter in a Blue Gown* (1944), John Marin’s *Movement – Sea or Mountain as You Will* (1947), Adolph Gottlieb’s *Alkahest of Paracelsus* (1945), Jackson Pollock’s *Number 10* (1949), Charles Sheeler’s *On a Shaker Theme* (1956), Hans Hofmann’s *Twilight* (1957), Franz Kline’s *Probst I* (1961), Morris Louis’ *Breaking Hue* (1954) and *Alioth* (1962), Friedel Dzubas’ *Elmslight* (1971), Helen Frankenthaler’s *Ocean Desert* (1975), Neil G. Welliver’s *Gould’s Hill* (1972), and Jules Olitski’s *Natural Histories I* (1977).

art in the past, when facing contemporary art, although we are not sure where it will go, we give our sincerest appreciations.³⁸

The gallery space was divided into two parts, with one side housing the figurative paintings and the other abstract art. The two parts were connected through an open door, which affirmed the differences existing between the two groups of paintings in their artistic productions, concepts, historical context and values, viewership, and other aspects.

The text-heavy catalogue book is a gem of the exhibition. As discussed and frequently quoted, two extensive articles are included, written by Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. and Kenworth Moffett. Besides that, on a separate page prior to each painting, which is either black-and-white or in color based on how much the organizer wanted to promote the specific work, there is always a detailed caption, which ranges from an art analysis to a historical review, and an introduction of the artist. Moreover, more diplomatic parlances are added to the catalogue, which include not only the “Greetings from the President,” but also an “Introduction” and “Acknowledgement” by the chief curator of the museum and curator of Asian Art Jan Fontein. Recalling late Qing artist Wu Changshuo’s gifted calligraphy “Be The Student of History (*Yi Gu Wei Tu*)” to the museum in 1912, Fontein traces the communication between China and the museum back to the Republic of China period – which is not pointed out but blurred into an overall revolution fighting against the injustice of feudalism – when “the people were fighting to turn over feudalism and establish a new nation.”³⁹ At the end of the catalogue, a complete list of translated terms used in the articles and captions and their explanations are given. There are not only terms specific to America such as “The Eight” and “The Hudson River School,” but also general terms in Western art history such as “*Trompe l’oeil*” and “Avant-garde.” These terms range from names of schools (i.e.

³⁸ Stebbins, 29.

³⁹ Jan Fontein, “Introduction,” *Catalogue*, 6.

“abstract expressionism”), styles (i.e. “baroque”), techniques (i.e. “veils”), materials (i.e. “acrylic”), groups (i.e. “The Eight”), and other specific terms that may be not familiar to the Chinese audiences (i.e. “French Salon”).⁴⁰

Overall, compared to an average catalogue book for an exhibition, this catalogue is coined with educational and diplomatic purposes. A book that systematically discussed history and art history was easy became canonical, even institutionally foundational in China because such foreign books, especially accompanied with illustrations of artworks, were extremely rare if not non-existent. Therefore, the exhibition became not only an art exhibition for those who focus on the techniques and trends, but also an exhibition of the history and society of America. Together, the works and catalogue evidenced a “true” America. It is not be possible to view the exhibition and read the catalogue without remembering that liberalism, understood as America’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of America, to the Americans, and to the people worldwide.⁴¹

A brief comparison with China’s attempt in the cultural exchange program will further show the effectiveness and cultural power relations in *The Exhibition*. The cultural exchange involved dual directions and China tried to present herself through art and artifacts as well – however, in a comparative context, the approach did not show equal sophistication and effectiveness to the American counterpart. Driven by the intention to build its international image, and materialized under the agreement, in 1979 China arranged a magnificent show of archeological finds and, a year later, a touring exhibition in 1980 featuring the socialist realist group sculptures *The Collection Courtyard* (1965), which originally contained 114 life-sized clay

⁴⁰ *Catalogue*, 176-179.

⁴¹ This sentence is inspired by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.”

figures.⁴² The exhibition of archeological finds glorified the ancient civilization and became popular among American audiences because the exhibition showed a mysterious past geographically, culturally, and chronologically distant from the audiences. It impressed through mystery, distance, and exoticism. It did not imply any applicability to real life, nor did it even show associations with the new political entity of People's Republic of China. In contrast, *The Collection Courtyard* was used to institutionalize the foreign audiences the same way it was used to treat the domestic audiences. The group sculpture consists of seven parts, narrating the story of how the proletarian people suffered from and rebelled against a feudalist landlord before 1949. The narration follows the language and format favored by the leaders and popularized in China during the Cultural Revolution.⁴³ Through repetitive cultivation as well as forced and forceful permeation, further accompanied and enhanced by slogans and the "little red book," the domestic audiences of China were obligated to learn and familiarize themselves with the certain kind of narrations and visual representations as a survival tool during the Cultural Revolution, but the content and educational value of the narration could not intrigue the oversea audiences for its pedagogies, contents, and ideologies. In a worse sense, the socialist realist style might evoke dislike among the audiences. Therefore, the effect of China's exhibitions in the United States were at most to show and to entertain through distant and exotic cultural artifacts, and to some extent, the shows evoked opposition more than attraction because of the communist content and mindset.

Contractually, the American organizers, through self-fashioning autoethnographic representation of the cultural artifacts, created an attractive and easily comprehensive "travel

⁴² It is increased to 119 figures during the Cultural Revolution to include the images of the soldiers, peasants, workers and Red Guards.

⁴³ Ellen Liang, *The Winking Owl*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 62.

book” of the United States and the Americans to the Chinese audiences who had enjoyed little, if any, access to the culture. Recall the “Greetings from the U.S. President” in the catalogue, in which the mission of *The Exhibition* is framed as “to tell America’s story” and to let Chinese people “familiarize with American Life.”⁴⁴ This mission, especially the later part “to familiarize with American Life,” situates the representation of the United States not only as a political entity, but also an ethnographic subjectivity – an attempt of self-objectification— in which the society and the people are studied and reported through a cultural anthropological lens. *The Exhibition*, by showing a world of cultural artifacts, rather than purely artistic presentations without contextualization and historicization, formed “a discrete system of signs.”⁴⁵

Usually, an ethnographic project is conducted by those holding a cultural supremacy, upon a subaltern or distant group. However, *The Exhibition* was put up in a self-fashioning autoethnography that, like many other cultural ethnographies, served as an allegory to the recipients as a “possible ‘us’ (the recipients).” As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, an exhibition of both heavily contextualized subject and object is a representation that “interprets” itself, which falls into the category of an allegory. The “discrete system of signs” – the paintings as cultural artifacts – are symbols of the textual articulations of the political and cultural ideologies. This “possible ‘us’ (the recipients)” is concretized through the implied similarities in origins versus distancing binary in culturally and socio-politically evolutionary paths between the written subjectivity and the reality lived by the recipients.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Catalogue*, 5.

⁴⁵ James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of Advanced American Research Seminar*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 94-95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

As mentioned, in the articles written by Stebbins and Moffett as well as the extended description of each work, matching or even equivalent histories of China and the United States are frequently seen, such as class struggles, revolutions, visually elevation of the ordinary people, and favor of proletarian taste and amateur farmer artists during the first a few decades after the founding of the nation. The “From 1913 To Present” part in Stebbins’ article functions to explain and suggest the alternative option or the “possible us” to Chinese audiences: prosperity and international power of the United States, the two things China and Chinese people have been longing for, stem from the nation’s struggle for independence and liberation against imperialism and colonialization (the Great Britain), as well as the inhumane economic system (slavery). Evidently the United States, as a perfect example of the preceding adventurer, the “possible China” after all the inner and outer revolutions should take messages represented and reflected in the cultural artifacts and adopt the American way – a message successfully and effectively delivered through the paintings and the texts.

Chapter 3: Anti-Assimilation: When the Crisis of Potential Cancellation Happened

During the early post-Cultural Revolution years when foreign art exhibition tournaments were initiated based on cooperative programs in the fields of art and culture between China and other countries, it was not rare to see the foreign exhibition organizers, by adding some more “eccentric” ingredients into the “formula,” bring a variety of works which, through their sharp difference from socialist realism, were eye-opening to the Chinese audiences. For instance, *The Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century* at National Art Museum of China in March 1978 showed works in traditions of the relatively familiar French academy, as well as impressionist works as part of the Modernist Movement, such as Claude Monet’s *A Farmyard in Normandy* (1863), Pierre Auguste Renoir’s *The Banks of the Seine at Champrosay* (1876), and Camille Pissarro’s *Apple Trees and Poplars in a Sunset* (1901).⁴⁷ The combination of styles, namely French academy versus impressionism, went through the censorship smoothly because, regardless of the fact that impressionism was born in the bourgeoisie class and reflecting bourgeoisie life styles and tastes, these selected and decontextualized paintings showed the culturally and ideologically neutral subjects of landscapes and were threaded into the entire collection of a coherent subject, without being given extra attention. The title of the exhibition “Rural Landscape” further situated the collection into a proletarian base, which was by all means favored by the Chinese organizers. The only transcendental aspect of the impressionist works was that the painting technique and styles differ from the then institutional mainstream, which was certainly a minor issue given that impressionist techniques and styles, such as that of Pierre-

⁴⁷ *Catalogue of The Exhibition of French Rural Landscape Paintings from the 19th Century*, 1979.

Auguste Renoir, had already been exposed to Chinese audiences as early as in the *First Chinese National Fine Arts Exhibition* of 1929.⁴⁸

However, unlike their French predecessor, American organizers of *The Exhibition* were more intrusive to the Chinese officials, despite the warning of strict censorship that the Americans encountered in the “American Film Week” a couple of months prior, during which time only a few “ideologically correct” films, such as Disney’s *Snow White*, were shown in the tournament.⁴⁹ Among the 70 paintings on display, 12 of which were abstract, in context and comparison with other 58 figurative pieces. These 12 paintings, which were promoted ceremoniously as the climax of the exhibition, challenged the Chinese officials’ sensibility.

According to the catalogue book, these 12 works are John Marin’s *Movement – Sea or Mountain as You Will* (1947), Adolph Gottlieb’s *Alkahest of Paracelsus* (1945), Jackson Pollock’s *Number 10* (1949), Charles Sheeler’s *On a Shaker Theme* (1956), Hans Hofmann’s *Twilight* (1957), Franz Kline’s *Probst I* (1961), Morris Louis’ *Breaking Hue* (1954) and *Alioth* (1962), Friedel Dzubas’ *Elmslight* (1971), Helen Frankenthaler’s *Ocean Desert* (1975), Neil G. Welliver’s *Gould’s Hill* (1972), as well as Jules Olitski’s *Natural Histories I* (1977).⁵⁰ One thing noticeable is the placement of John Marin’s 1947 work ahead of Adolph Gottlieb’s 1945 work in the catalogue book, which fails to follow the chronological order according to which the rest of the abstract pictures are placed. This uncommon design will be discussed later.

⁴⁸ Julia F. Andrews, “Japanese Oil Paintings in the First Chinese National Fine Arts Exhibition of 1929 and the Development of Asian Modernism,” in *The Role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art*, ed., Joshua A. Fogel, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 181-211: 197.

⁴⁹ James P. Sterba, “U.S. Exhibition on View in Pecking,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1981, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/02/arts/us-art-exhibition-on-view-in-peking.html>.

⁵⁰ *Catalogue*, 152-175

Nancy Berliner, now the Wu Tung Curator of Chinese Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, who participated in the curatorial project in 1981, records a crisis mainly targeting the abstract expressionist paintings in the process of realizing the show.

Upon the arrival of the containers, Chinese officials announced that thirteen paintings could not be displayed – the abstract expressionist works and one nude. The Americans were insistent. The Chinese were firm. A week of tense negotiations ensued during which Jan Fontein, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, was said to have put down his foot and said, in effect, all or nothing. The Chinese eventually agreed and the full exhibit went forward.⁵¹

Meredith Palmer, who was then an arts specialist at the U.S. International Communication Agency (USICA) for the State Department,⁵² recalls the obstacle. Slightly different from Berliner's memory, Palmer points out that the one insisting on "all or not" was not the chief curator of the museum Jan Fontein. Rather, it was the State Department officials.

But at the last minute, Chinese officials objected to the dozen abstract works and one nude in the show. We held discussions among all parties but saw no compromise for outright censorship. *We stood behind the Boston Museum and insisted on the whole show or no show* (italics mine). We were all out on a limb — we had important delegations arriving from Washington for the opening, and if the show was canceled, we would have problems on the American side as well as the Chinese side.

I remember a tense weekend of waiting in the embassy, worried that the Chinese would call to escalate their complaint to higher officials. The call came Monday...

A seasoned China hand, Chas W. Freeman, who was acting ambassador, saw the situation the same way: *Democratic principles of free expression were at stake, not to mention artistic expression* (italics mine).

"I recall taking this move by the Ministry of Culture all the way to the vice foreign minister, saying that this situation was out of hand and that it would cause everyone embarrassment," Freeman said. "I told them that China's reputation, not ours, would be the one to suffer."

⁵¹ Nancy Berliner, "Not so Abstract: Re-considering the 1981 Exhibition of Masterpieces from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston," *Australian Center on China in the World*, March 8 2014, accessed February 8 2015 <http://www.thechinastory.org/2013/03/not-so-abstract-re-considering-the-1981-exhibition-of-masterpieces-from-the-museum-of-fine-arts-boston/>

⁵² Nancy Berliner.

It is not hard to understand the Chinese officials' dislike of William McCregor Paxton's *The Nude* (1915), but this time, obviously, the main target was not the "decadent" nudity. Eventually, the 12 abstract paintings and *The Nude* were put on display, indicating the triumph of the American organizer, the abstract art, as well as the ideology behind the organizer and embedded in the hues.

Indeed, it is not only the historical facts reflected through the depicted subjects and changing patrons that "tell America's story" through pictorial narrations, but also, more essentially, in order to "tell America's story," it is to define what "America" is and stands for, or to visually elaborate on the ideological, cultural and instructional circumstances of the political entity in the context of the globe. Thus, abstract paintings formed, arguably, the most important part of the exhibition because they both formally embodied America's Democratic Principles of liberalism, but also presented the message themselves in the creative process and artistic production. In other words, if the figurative paintings were representations of America and American history, then the abstract paintings were embodiments of America and American spirits, as designed by the exhibition organizer.

The design of the catalogue book reflects a tip of an iceberg in terms of the key position of the abstract paintings. As mentioned, Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr's *A History of American Paintings* gives clear periodization of the history with the final and longest part denoted to "Art from 1913 to Present," in which abstract art is introduced and explained with tremendous efforts. Besides combing through the history and art history like other sections, expecting disagreement with and dislike of abstract art *from* Chinese audiences, Stebbins tells of the objections from domestic audiences, critics and practitioners and, assertively, granted people appreciating and collecting abstract art superiority in intelligence and civilization to those who do not.

Traditional artists, exposed to such fierce challenges, flounce, while the modernist artists carry on lashing out the cliché and outdated values with courage and efforts to win acceptance and sponsorships. This conflict continues till today. *Ordinary audiences*, especially those who receive a *limited amount of education*, tend to comment on Jackson Pollock's paintings, "That is barely art. Even my kids can paint better." Even now, most works in circulation are still realistic. Today, the most popular artist in America is Andrew Wyeth, who lives in a rural area in Pennsylvania and paints rural landscapes and portraits of his neighbor farmers. In contrast, those who are *well educated* stand on the other side: what they, as private collectors, as well as almost all *American museums and institutions*, are buying modernist works, either abstract art or figurative paintings in a modern technique (italics mine).⁵³

Assertively, appreciators of abstract art are described as "well educated," and "(keeping pace with) almost all American museums and institutions;" while the non-appreciators are written as "ordinary audiences" and who have "received limited amounts of education." Rural landscape paintings and portraits of ordinary people are highly praised and treated as the hallmarks of the period in a previous section because, as mentioned before, landscapes are associated with national identity and patriotism and portraits of ordinary people imply a wider spread interests and demands in art nationwide, an indicator of greater national wealth. However, the rural residential artists and the subjects are nearly humiliatingly dismissed here, further confirming the outdated status of the genre as well as the livelihood of abstract art in the present.

Stebbins quotes Robert Motherwell's words to describe abstract art as a rebellious hero: "One of the most striking of abstract art's appearance is her nakedness, an art stripped bare. How many rejections on the part of her artists! Whole worlds – the world of objects, the world of power and propaganda, the world of anecdotes, the world of fetishes and ancestor worship..."⁵⁴ He further magnifies the importance of abstract painting and writes,

⁵³ *Catalogue*, 23-24.

⁵⁴ Mary Ann Caws and Robert Motherwell, *Robert Motherwell*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 86. *Catalogue*, 26. The catalogue is all written in Chinese, and the matching translation of the same paragraph is found in Caws and Motherwell's *Robert Motherwell*.

When we “appreciate” a piece of abstract expressionist painting, we are intrigued by its form, its color, and the retrospective process of the artist’s creativity. Through the drips, splashes and wild strokes, we peep into the artist’s inner world and empathize for his passion. Today, many art critics see Pollock as the key historical figure of the school. Since 1950s, some artists have been experimenting with the direction and concept that Pollock was seeking for – the relationship between the pigments and the picture plane (or the canvas)...

This type of painting (abstract paintings) may be ‘mainstream’ of contemporary paintings, which is to say that this kind of art may become *center of our age* and represents best works of 1970s...many artists see Pollock and his contemporaries as their advisors and pioneers, but they adopted a more neutral and emotionless style ...(italics mine)⁵⁵

Moreover, according to Stebbins’ text, Morris Louis succeeded because he advanced Pollock’s experiment on the relationship between the pigments and the canvas, and further influenced Frank Stella and Agnes Martin. Therefore, a clear lineage of apprenticeship appears, as if Pollock is the founding father of many different schools besides the two generations of abstract expressionism. Thus, it is understandable that the rationale behind the switched order of John Marin’s *Movement – Sea or Mountain as You Will* (1947) and Adolph Gottlieb’s *Alkahest of Paracelsus* (1945) is entrenched in the description of Gottlieb’s work, “The spontaneous and randomly placed sketches do not intend to convey any specific subject, which we see the direction leading toward abstract expressionist master – Pollock’s success in a few years.”⁵⁶ Pollock is at the center of the stage where all spotlights are trained on him – he has advanced Gottlieb’s initial idea, reached the climax of the school, and influenced later masters. Through these words, it is not hard to find that Jackson Pollock is considered as the icon and symbol of contemporary American art, due to the rebellious spirit, of freedom of expression, of liberalism, and of contemporary America, culturally and ideologically featured in his work.

⁵⁵ *Catalogue*, 26-27.

⁵⁶ *Catalogue*, 154.

Stebbins' survey is followed by Curator of Twentieth Century Art Kenworth Moffett's "American Abstract Paintings Since 1945," which further heightens Stebbins' argument textually and visually with a photo of the Hans Hoffman painting and one of Jackson Pollock in the middle of his action painting, named "Painting." Moffett writes,

The tremendous contribution of postwar American abstract art to the world, especially that of artist Jackson Pollock's, was to significantly enlarge the definition and concept of a painting, which re-questioned what a painting should be like, how should it be painted, and what kind of materials to apply. In terms of styles, the American people offered two influential trends: mega-size and emphasis on coloration.⁵⁷

However, the mere visual effect of mega-size and coloration cannot fully explain the triumph of American art. Calling on the audiences' attention to freedom and liberalism, Moffett writes,

Pollock's methods of painting suit best with a very big or even super-sized picture plane. The composition is not preset. Instead, it is born through the process. Unorthodox methods of splashes help Pollock break the physical boundaries limited by the artist's wrist, elbow, and shoulder. He can paint from any direction and does not need to worry about the direction to hang the work until it is finished.

Artists of figurative paintings cannot enjoy these possibilities, because the subject and content primarily decide the size, composition, direction, material and techniques...⁵⁸

If the 12 abstract paintings had been removed from the exhibition under pressure from China's side, the exhibition, given the weight and importance of the abstract paintings elaborated in the articles included in the catalogue, would have lost most, if not all, of its meaning and failed to deliver its ideological message. Recall that Chas W. Freeman, who was the acting ambassador, indicated at the critical time: "Democratic principles of free expression were at stake, not to mention artistic expression."⁵⁹ The abstract paintings are symbols and representations of the "democratic principles of free expression" in the game. Combining scholarship and efforts, Stebbins and Moffett elaborate on the liberalism embedded in abstract art

⁵⁷ *Catalogue*, 31.

⁵⁸ *Catalogue*, 31-32.

⁵⁹ Meredith Palmer.

in a multilayered and multi-faceted way. First, according to the text, tracing back to the Modernist movement in Europe, abstract art, like their experimental but not yet matured predecessors, was born in an age featuring artistic freedom and celebrating self-achievement. The texts summarize that the absence of powerful patrons forces the artists to struggle to survive and thrive, which makes almost infinite space for innovations and creativity. Second, the reason that America became the leader of global contemporary art in the postwar era is largely indebted to the invention and success of abstract expressionism, which, in terms of scale and coloration in particular, sets up the new and, arguably, most influential trend in global contemporary art. Therefore, abstract expressionism is at the frontier of global contemporary art. Third, Jackson Pollock is the peak of the school. Singled out in the text, he acquired the highest honor and greatest achievement by maturing and advancing the formal language and concepts of abstract expressionism. The assertion, oversimplification, model setting, sense of absolute omnipotence and other issues prevent the two articles from delivering serious scholarship built upon critical thinking. Given the curators' education, they would have written a better manuscript, but that is not the mission. The flawed aspects of the texts use Abstract Expressionism and Jackson Pollock well to propagate the message of liberalism and freedom. To be more precise, on one hand, the message embodies liberalism and freedom at the terms' core values; while on the other hand, it is to propagate the message of liberalism and freedom in a preliminarily set binary context, still embodying a strong antagonistic tension between the Cold War camps.

Why are abstract art and its makers, especially Pollock and his abstract expressionist art, key to the exhibition to such extent that the dozen pieces almost dwarf the other 58 artworks? And why are Pollock and his abstract expressionist art crowned as the climax of modern American art

in both the preface article and in Moffett's "Modern American Art Since 1945?" Both Palmer's and Berliner's memoirs of, and comments on the exhibition guide confirm that a continuous Cold War mindset, which is wrapped in the form of the so-called Cultural Cold War strategies, penetrated the entire project. For instance, Palmer recalls that before the exhibition "At the State Department, we watched closely as other political and cultural developments unfolded. I remember the cables coming across my desk from 'American Embassy, Beijing' discussing the protests of 1979 and the Democracy Wall, where unprecedented calls for freedoms and criticism of party policies were posted;"⁶⁰ while Berliner mentions that the U.S. government funded art exhibitions had been sent to Europe to "enlighten audiences there about American culture, abstract art – intended to be a direct contrast with Soviet socialist realism – was a chosen propagator of American culture."⁶¹ She also points out that in the case of touring the art in China, "more than two decades later, the American government continued the same direction, sending abstract art to a Communist country as a political message."⁶²

According to the official documents and participants, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the CIA systematically promoted altruism and the idea that the world was in need of a new age of enlightenment which would be called "The American Century."⁶³ Ernest Bevin, architect of the Information Research Department (IRD) of the British Foreign Office, once explained, "We cannot hope successfully to repel Communism only by disparaging it on material grounds ... and must add a positive appeal to Democratic and Christian principles ... We must put forward a rival ideology to Communism." The "rival ideology" was by all means capitalist democracy.⁶⁴ Entering the 1980s, although scholars in the United States, such as Dr. Serge Guilbaut who

⁶⁰ Meredith Palmer.

⁶¹ Nancy Berliner.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Frances S. Saunders, "Introduction," 2-4.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 58.

published *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* in 1983, started figuring out and criticizing the CIA's approaches, the "outdated" campaign of persuasion was continually in use by the American Foreign Office without problems, because China had been diplomatically closed for a long time. No matter whether the high officials and specialists of foreign affairs were aware of the America's strategies, evidenced in Wu Wenguang's documentary film, the majority of ordinary citizens only learned the demonized version of the United States and had very little if not zero knowledge of American culture through visual and textual materials for decades. Therefore, the "outdated" Cultural Cold War strategies were still effective in 1980s China. In fact, the accumulated experiences of operating the cultural weapons set a model for the curatorial team of *The Exhibition*. The press release by James J. Sweeney for the 1952 exhibition of the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art in Paris writes, "...of the desirability for contemporary artists of living and working in an atmosphere of freedom. On display will be masterpieces that could not have been created nor whose exhibition would be allowed by such totalitarian regimes as Nazi Germany or present-day Soviet Russia and her satellites, as been evidenced in those governments' labelling as 'degenerate' or 'bourgeois' of many of the paintings and sculptures included."⁶⁵ This press release and the approaches reflected in the release sound very similar to the case of *The Exhibition* almost three decades later.

Both Stebbins' and Moffett's articles proudly celebrate the "triumph of American painting." By weaving American paintings since 1945 into the textile of American political ideology, national self-image, and history of the country, the art specialists speak for the artists because the idea (of 'triumph of American painting') was hardly and rarely "consciously articulated by artists"

⁶⁵ James J. Sweeney, press release, 18 April 1952 (ACCF/NYU)

or “directly perceived by their audiences.”⁶⁶ Max Kozloff claims that, “American art became a conscious mouthpiece for any agency as was, say, the Voice of America.”⁶⁷ Artists such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, and Arshile Gorky all passed through the government-sponsored WPA phase of their careers.⁶⁸ Works of these artists, among which Pollock’s and Gottlieb’s were included in *The Exhibition*, do not show clear references to any specific stance of political ideology or national interests. Instead, an inward self-expression seems to be the main and only subject. Like Stebbins, Kozloff quotes Robert Motherwell, “Modern art is related to the problem of the modern individual’s freedom. For this reason the history of modern art tends at certain moments to become the history of modern freedom,”⁶⁹ in which statement Motherwell crafts such a strong bond between modern art to modern freedom that almost the sole value under modern art is to present and represent free spirit. This assertive and unitary oversimplification of modern American art, reinforced and enshrined repetitively by critics, art historians, curators and media specialists, is more like a mass campaign to promote than a reaction to a newly emerging school of art. The obsession and celebration in Stebbins’ and Moffett’s writings, along with the State Department’s fervent involvement and the participants’ associating *The Exhibition* with America’s art touring in Soviet Union in the 1960s, well resonates with Kozloff’s words,

Here, at least, the artist was allowed, if only through indifference, to be at liberty and to pursue the inspired vagaries of his own conscience. Elsewhere in the world, where fascist or communist totalitarianism ruled, or where every energy had been spent in fighting them, the situation was otherwise. Modern American art, abandoning its erstwhile support for left-wing agitation during the ‘30s, now self-propagandized itself as a champion of eternal humanist freedom.

⁶⁶ Max Kozloff, “American Painting During the Cold War,” *Pollock and After*, edited by Francis Frascina, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 130.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

The Cold War camps, led by the United States, are frequently situated in a binary relationship. Kozloff's critique of U.S. art exhibitions in the the Soviet Union in the 1960s applies to *The Exhibition in China* in 1981 as well.

On September 2nd, 1981, one day after *The Exhibition's* opening, *The New York Times* published James P. Sterba's article "U.S. Art Exhibition on View in Peking," which recounted the controversy surrounding the inclusion of abstract works in the show. In accord with Palmer's memoir and the undertone of the catalogue articles, the *New York Times*, whose readership is based in the United States, labels the crisis and the result as the Chinese officials' failed attempt to challenge the American value and the ultimate triumph of the American spirit, namely "freedom" and "Democratic Principles of Liberalism" in this case.

Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, who came to China in part to open the United States exhibition, departed from his prepared remarks at ceremonies this morning to pointedly stress the importance of free expression in America.

"It is the American spirit of freedom that is represented by this exhibit," he said. "The works of art in this exhibition express the American spirit of freedom in which each person can write, paint and do whatever he wants as long as it does not violate the Constitution."⁷⁰

Sterba understands the crisis, which is the objection against abstract paintings and the nude, as the result of the Chinese party leaders being afraid to show the truth of America, which includes freedom, liberalism, and modernization.

The Communist Party in China has been extremely sensitive about revealing to the Chinese populace conditions and freedoms enjoyed by people in foreign lands. This is because it has subjected its people to hardships and ideological control that over the last quarter of a century have proved to be unnecessary and demeaning...

...The reasons are obvious. The more the Chinese learn about the ways Americans function in a free environment, the more the party, which amounts to 4 percent of the Chinese population, is questioned. It is only through word of mouth

⁷⁰ Sterba.

and underground communications that Chinese intellectuals have been exposed to strains of the diversity of artistic opinion, especially of the modern era...⁷¹

As Zhang Xudong points out, it is not uncommon to adopt binary frameworks when one encounters a cultural contact zone between the former Cold War camps and countries related to the camps. However, this framework is fully adapted by the State Department and understood by the curatorial team and newspaper reporters.

Mechanical and superficial views still boast empirical and ideological clarity, yet they invariably depend on obsolete binary opposites – state versus society, “official” versus “nonofficial,” dictatorship versus democracy, communism versus capitalism, hard-liners versus reformers, government intervention versus free market, etc. We are experiencing an increasing and intensifying discrepancy between the perceived object called China and the lingering epistemological models rooted in the Cold War, backed by the even more time-honored machinery of “knowing the Other” of the long history of the global expansion of capitalism.⁷²

On September 13th, the newspaper publishes “A Letter to Sterba,” responding to the previous reportage “U.S. Art Exhibition on View in Peking.” The letter is from Susanne Cohn, who was invited by the Chinese Ministry of Culture's Bureau of Arts Education which is to discuss 20th-Century American art. According to Cohn, her audiences included “teachers and students of four major cities and a group of young 'dissident' artists.”⁷³ Her talks were accompanied by “hundreds of slides representing art of the last 80 years, with a special section devoted to work completed in the last three years, displayed in museums and private New York galleries. Abstract art was strongly in evidence.”⁷⁴ Therefore, Sterba, and the large body of media and audiences who are behind him and whose opinions are represented by him, is wrong to regard abstract art as a secret outside the ideologically controlled country. The country, seen on the opposite node on the axis

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 25.

⁷³ Susanne Cohn, “Abstract Art Is Not Foreign to China,” *New York Times Archive*, September 13, 1981, Access on February 13, 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/13/opinion/abstract-art-is-not-foreign-to-china.html>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

of ideology and political rightness, is not as singular as a gigantic monster preventing truth and information from entering. Cohn points out that although there is nothing wrong to relate the attitudes of some Chinese officials, “to generalize the practice of ‘official’ Chinese opinion from a few statements or incidents” is “an error.”⁷⁵

This crisis of potential cancellation intensified and dramatized *The Exhibition*, making it not only an art exhibition but more of a political and ideological statement, although even without the crisis it should not be possible to view the exhibition and read the catalogue without remembering that liberalism, understood as America’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of America to Americans and to people worldwide. Through the entire process, the Chinese side either chose to keep silent about the rationale behind the opposition to the abstract art – or maybe they were muted and overwhelmed by the keen voices from the American side so people nowadays can only find voices from one side. Maybe the Chinese officials were just uncomfortable with the unfamiliarity of the styles, or maybe they started with considerate intentions to have the ordinary people learn more about America’s history through more comprehensive and narrative paintings which have more visual references to real life scenes. We do not know the rationale and probably will never. However, the crisis and the mutation of one side left space for the other to elaborate on and propagate their missions well.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Cultural Shock – Or Not So Shocked: The Domestic Responses

Today, the mushrooming of international art exhibitions and expos in China has created a dynamic and simultaneous cultural and commercial exchange connecting the domestic and international artists and art markets, but at the same time, the marginal effect of “another” art event makes it harder to excite the art professionals and lovers, and to have substantial influence of a similar level. It is almost unimaginable how *The Exhibition* turned into a fête of art for audiences, especially professional artists and art students – it is impossible for today’s artists and art students to understand the euphoria felt by artists at the time. But it is also difficult for artists who came of age in the early 1980s to remember the importance of *The Exhibition* on their careers. The effects of *The Exhibition*, both short and long term, were many and profound.

At the time, as mentioned in the previous section, art students had an increasing level of exposure and accessibility to foreign artworks and related publications. This led to a college student’s overexcitement when Kenworth Moffett presented at the Zhejiang Art Academy.⁷⁶ Of course, the school authorities disliked and were suspicious of such enthusiasm, given the strained relationship between China and the United States at the time. Besides the direct responses from the viewers, newspapers and magazines followed up *The Exhibition* with articles and analysis, and provoked extensive discussions and debates on issues centering on ideologies, styles and other aspects. The domestic responses were divided into two extremes: the absolute acceptance and some weak opposition gridded in the frameworks of the very outdated Mao’s doctrines. Hence, the unequal power relations in the cultural contact zone led to a high culture fever over the “Western Other,” and the Occidentalism of self-belittling.

Recalled by Meredith Palmer, the arts specialist at the United States International Communication Agency (USICA) for the State Department who was on site during the

⁷⁶ Zhejiang Art Academy is now China Art Academy.

exhibition, reactions to the show divided into two kinds – oil painters of realist-trainings were captivated by the technique of the paintings, and the rest who seemed to be more startled by the abstract pieces. Artist Zhou Tiehai who was in middle school at the time appreciated Sargent’s technique but preferred Pollock overall. Zhang Peili, one of the earliest video artists in China, visited the exhibit when he was a college sophomore. The work that impressed Zhang the most was Edward Hopper’s *A Room in Brooklyn* (1932) for its sense of isolation and distance. Art Critic Li Xianting expressed his excitement, “I almost entered a state of unconsciousness. Chinese art always placed an emphasis on consciousness and political stance. With abstract art, people could freely express their emotions. However, traditional Chinese literati paintings were quite close to Western modernism. It was more casual and open-minded.”⁷⁷ Apparently, by saying “an emphasis on consciousness and political stance,” Li Xianting referred to “revolutionary art” or “art during the past few decades.” However, the extreme cultural repression made him and many other people overwhelmed and dominated by the impression of revolutionary socialist realist art as the mere form of art.

Full of excitement and even “a state of unconsciousness,” *The Exhibition* turned into a carnival especially for the professional audiences and art students. A preview of the exhibition open to a group of artists was organized by the Boston Museum and the American Embassy. As Palmer vividly describes,

Excited to see the originals, the artists ran between the paintings closely examining how the works were painted. They carefully studied the Copley and Sargent, then gathered around the Jackson Pollock drip painting *Number 10*, 1949 to stare in wonderment at the surface, which included a cigarette butt and hairpin imbedded in the “all-over” skein of paint. They also stopped in front of the all-white but textured Jules Olitski painting, pondering how he had applied the paint to the canvas.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Meredith Palmer.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Zha Li, translator of the 1983 edition of Kandinsky's *Du Spirituel dans l'Art* and student admitted to the Zhejiang Art Academy in 1977 (dismissed right before graduation), recalls his excitement about, as well as impression and experience of *The Exhibition*. It was Zha Li and his fellow students' first experience with original works of "Western Modernist art."⁷⁹ Helen Frankenthaler's *Ocean Desert* (1975) attracted students' attention and interests for its embedded musicality and lyricism. Zha uses the Chinese folk adage "A tossed stone raises a thousand ripples" (*Yi shi ji qi qian ceng lang*) to describe the shock among the viewers. He unreservedly writes, "Under this external force, cracks appear on the surface of the enclosed cultural system, from which a flood from the outside world intrudes – from then on, there is no chance for a U-turn in contemporary Chinese art."⁸⁰

Zha goes on to recall that Kenworth Moffett, author of "American Abstract Painting Since 1945" and executive of the exhibit, gave a presentation on Modern American art at the academy. The Zhejiang Art Academy was evidently one of the most open-minded institutions back in the post-Mao era. For instance, in 1979, the academy, in collaboration with the Zhejiang Provincial Foreign Language Bookstore and a few other local publishers, held the "International Imported Art Book Exhibition. The entire exhibition was later purchased for the school library "with the explicit aim of opening eyes that had been closed for thirty years."⁸¹ The lecture hall was so crowded that "even water cannot travel through the crowd."⁸² Zha passed a slip of paper to Moffett, which was observed by "several pairs of eyes spying in the dark." The next day, rumor of Zha "transmitting messages to the foreigners" was widely spread, and alerted the offices of

⁷⁹ Zha Li, "The Frozen Time: Fragmented Memories of the Class of 1977 of the Oil Painting Department at China Art Academy," March 16, 2009, *The Verified Blog of Zha Li*, accessed March 10, 2015, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5ce0a6480100c77a.html.

Here, the "Class of 1977" indicates the college entrance year instead of graduation year.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, "Art after Mao, 1976-1989," in *The Art of Modern China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 201-224: 215.

⁸² Ibid.

security and foreign affairs. The academy impounded all letters sent from Moffett, so he never received a reply from Zha. In fact, Zha was only asking Moffett to find an uncirculated and untranslated book on some art theory. However, due to Moffett's insistence on not showing the slip to the investigators and the overt suspicions, the simple request for knowledge become filled with suspense and drama.⁸³

People's Daily, mouthpiece for the Communist Party and the Government, portrayed the image of America as swaying back and forth repetitively and dramatically in the first few years of the Reform Age. During 1978 and 1979, the presentation of the United States in *People's Daily* changed from the absolute negation and denunciation featured in Mao's regime to the more positive side.⁸⁴ However, in the first few months of 1981, attempting to balance between the reformist and the conservative in order to stabilize the politics, the CCP Central Committee passed a special resolution on journalistic practices, and criticized reportages with excessive liberal views. Later, Deng Xiaoping personally reiterated his commitment to a revolutionary ideology and loyalty to Mao's ideology to the United States Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan.⁸⁵

On September 29, 1981, *People's Daily* published Jin Weinuo's article "Review on *The Exhibition of Important Original Works From the American Paintings Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*."⁸⁶ Jin Weinuo was the department head of Art History at the Central Art Academy and a council member of the Chinese Artists Association. Therefore, this article serves as the voice of, or at least stands in line with, the official opinions. One would argue that a single article dedicated to the exhibition only showed indifference or purposeful dismissal of the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Li Jing, 129.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁶ Jin Weinuo, "Review on *The Exhibition of Important Original Works From the American Paintings Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*," *People's Daily*, September 29, 1981.

exhibition instead of offering a supportive tone. However, to be noticed, the year 1981 was the 100th anniversary of Lu Xun's birth (born on September 25, 1881). For almost the entire second half of September, the eighth pages of arts and literatures were packed with articles commemorating Lu Xun's literary and artistic contributions. Placing an article on a foreign exhibition, or anything unrelated to Lu Xun, during the second half of the month was truly rare.

In Jin's rather plain article, the author recaps the textual content in the catalogue book and explains how the articles assist the art works to tell America's story. The article appreciates the achievement of American art as a derivative born out of European tradition which has later acquired its artistic uniqueness over time. Noticeably, a substantial portion of the text speaks highly of the abstract art on display. He writes, "Abstractionism and other modernist schools are artistic trends existing in America's art world, without which the audiences would not have seen a full picture of the history of American paintings. In order to help Chinese audiences understand this emerging phenomenon of abstract art, our American friends have devoted great efforts to choose works influenced by or similar to our own Chinese art, in order to fulfill the gap in aesthetic preferences and habits. These efforts show the curatorial experts' heartfelt wishes of quality communication in art between the two countries." Jin Weinuo's affirmation of both the abstract art and the intention of the American organizers is a sign of official acceptance of, or even support to, non-Realist arts and art from America, in this case. In China, as Perry Link mentions, the censorship is charged with seeing that China's culture stays in line with party policy and the high officials' preference.⁸⁷ Oftentimes, official media reveal information and messages that are quickly comprehended and implemented thoroughly. Thus, Jin Weinuo's article, being able to appear on the official newspaper, delivers a multilayered message which

⁸⁷ Richard Kraus, "China's artists between plan and market," in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, Richard Kraus ed., (NYC: Woodrow Wilson International Center, 1995), 174.

confirms the improved level of openness and open-mindedness of the authority, and also the friendship and ties with America, or, arguably, the capitalist West.

Launched in 1979 by the Central Art Academy, the *World Art (Shijie Meishu)* soon became one of the main publications to introduce foreign art trends, criticisms and practices. Besides original articles written by Chinese critics and scholars, there are substantial numbers of translations originally produced by foreign critics and art historians. It is seen as one of the relatively progressive Chinese cultural publications. Shortly before the exhibition, the third issue in 1981 publishes two brief announcements of the exhibition, with one introducing the Museum of Fine Art, Boston. Accompanied with the two introductions are two articles, in the same issue, both on Edward Hopper, with one written by Liu Pingjun and the other translated from Alexander Elliot's writing on Hopper's lithographic prints.⁸⁸ Liu Pingjun's article provides a genuine review and artistic analysis of Edward Hopper's oil paintings. Besides that, she quotes Hopper, "(The question of the value of nationality in art is perhaps unsolvable.) In general it can be said that a nation's art is greatest when it most reflects the character of its people,"⁸⁹ and therefore, Hopper successfully captures "some foundational spiritual crisis in the deep soul of the American people."⁹⁰

Lin Xiaoping's "America's Abstract Expressionism" was published in the first issue of 1983 (before the launch of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign).⁹¹ In the article, Lin takes a firm oppositional stance to negate and deny abstract expressionism, both in terms of artistic style and ideology. He writes,

⁸⁸ Liu Pingjun, "Works of American Artist Edward Hopper," *World Art*, Issue 3 1981, 38-40.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* For the translation and context, see <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edward-hopper-11844>.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39

⁹¹ Lin Xiaoping, "America's Abstract Expressionism," *World Art*, Issue 1, 1983, 71-77.

At core, the abstract expressionism in America stems from the crisis of capitalism. This crisis is not only politically and economically based, but also associated with their spirit and faith. As mentioned, the recent few decades of frequent economic depressions and imperialist warfare in the West have discouraged a significant number of intellectuals in Europe and America, who have lost faith in the future of human beings, and been questioning justice, truth, rationality and other values ... However, the abstract expressionist artists' wishes to detach from the society is obviously a daydream. They cannot escape from the restrictions in the Western society, nor correctly solve their own conflicts and contradictions. The facts that Jackson Pollock died from car accident while Arshile Gorky and Mark Rothko killed themselves are undeniable evidence...

... Indeed, abstract expressionism reflects the turbulence in Western society to some extent, especially the anxiety and depression of its people. It makes us know better the incurable disease of capitalism: economic depression and warfare – this is the true historical value of and lesson given by abstract expressionist art... We can see that abstract art can reflect reality, but its language is far less powerful, clear, and directional than Realist art, so it can hardly deliver the artists' inner world precisely – this is indeed the contradiction and restriction of abstract art.⁹²

How then did the *Fine Art (Meishu)* periodical react to the exhibition? The *Fine Art* periodical was arguably but evidently the most conservative and non-reformist compared to other official publications on literature, films and arts (*wenyi*). Moreover, *Fine Art* started embracing Dengist political ideology and “pro-Western” attempts far behind most, if not all of, other publications launched or resumed after the Culture Revolution. In Issue One of 1978, *Fine Art* published the article “War Drums Urging for the Spring – Jubilant Welcome to ‘Chairman Mao’s Letter to Chen Yi’ and Chairman Hua’s Inscription for *People’s Literature*,” in which two quotes of Mao are bolded and further highlighted with quotation marks: “to create all kinds of characters based on real life,” and “to implement the mission that ‘Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.’”⁹³ This article, on one hand, obscurely but clearly indicates a loosened cultural policy and the end of the “three emphases” come up by the Gang of Four; on the other hand, for *Fine Art*, it sets a new framework and a new scheme to

⁹² Lin Xiaoping, 76-77.

⁹³ Xia Yanjing, “The *Fine Art* Magazine to Be Written into the History of 1978” (“Xie jin li shi de 1978 nian Meishu zazhi”), *Graduate Institute of Art Studies* Vol. 5, (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, June 2011)

constrain the ideologies and tonalities of the periodical. In May 1978, *Theoretic Trends (Lilun Dongtai)*, official publication of the Communist Party School, published “Actual Practice is the Sole Criterion for Judging Truth,” following which *Guang Ming Daily*, *Xinhua Publisher*, *People’s Daily*, *People’s Liberation Army Daily* and all official periodicals of the arts and cultures repost the article. This article is much favored because it questions Chairman Hua’s “Two Whatever’s,” destabilizes Hua’s regime, and further loosens the cultural policy. In the midst of the heated debate, *People’s Drama* published “Drama Plays Need to Be Judged by the Actual Practice – Discussions Organized by the China Theater Association on How to Understand and Implement the Principle,” *Dance* “This Discussion Needs Great Attention,” and *People’s Film* “Open Discussion” which points out that “There is No ‘Models’ for Films.” However, *Fine Art* chose to be silent as if it had no access to the discussions.⁹⁴ Till 1981, there are only limited justifications and changes regarding the content and tonality of the periodical. In other words, *Fine Art* stood firmly in line with Chairman Hua Guofeng and his pro-Mao “Two Whatever’s.” In contemporary China, as Chen Xiaomei asserts, the “Western Other” is often used as an anti-official discourse and “a critique of Mao’s anti-urbanism.” Appreciation of the “Western Other” and indication of Western superiority is often regarded and used against “the domestic hegemony of the ruling ideology.”⁹⁵ Thus, although the pro-official, namely Hua’s regime, *Fine Art* claimed to “Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom,” it still supported and championed those within the ideological frameworks. Due to Mao’s guide of depicting real life through anthropological field studies, it leans towards realist art, or more precisely, the socialist realism for the proletarian class.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Chen Xiaomei, “Occidentalism as a Counter-Discourse: He Shang Controversy,” *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 27-28.

Unsurprisingly, Tantai Batiao's detailed and extended review of the exhibition summarizes the articles in the exhibition catalogue by periodizing the history of American art, and appreciating the excellent technical skills of figurative oil paintings. In the catalogue, Andrew Wyeth is mentioned as the favorite of the less educated population and counterexample of the Modernist artists, "(People of less education tend to like more realistic works.) Today, the most popular artist in America is Andrew Wyeth, who lives in a rural area in Pennsylvania and paints rural landscapes and portraits of his neighbor farmers. (In contrast, people of higher education recognize the Modernist art.)"⁹⁶ However, Tantai alters the original text and turns it into, "Today, the most popular artist in American is Andrew Wyeth, who is famous for his realistic paintings with a modernized technique. His works are not included in this exhibition."⁹⁷ The very brief paragraph on abstract paintings takes up less than five percent of the entire length of the essay and is finished in a rushed way, "to understand abstract expressionism is *just* to see the visualized flux of passion and energy via the forms, colors and drips (*italics mine*). Two pictures of such are included for your reference."⁹⁸ Besides the immediate review, in Issue Three of 1982, Chi Ke argues against Stebbins' writing on Pollock in his article "About 'Modern-ness,'"

In the catalogue book for the *The Exhibition*, the curator writes, "American Abstract paintings are always vivid, open, brave, unconstrained, and full of positivity." However, the famous abstract expressionist artist Pollock was a long-term alcoholic and encountered a sudden, premature death in a car accident...thus, it shows that they are not really "full of positivity."⁹⁹

Different voices emerge to support the non-realist and non-figurative art. Mao Shian contributes an article "Realism and Modernism: A Discussion on '(How) to Let A Hundred

⁹⁶ Stebbins, *Catalogue*, 23-24.

⁹⁷ Tantai Batiao, "The Pilgrimage of *The Exhibition of Important Original Works from the American Paintings Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*" ("Boshidun meishuguan guancang yuanhuazhan xunli"), *Fine Art (Meishu)*, Issue 11, 1981, 48-50.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Chi Ke, "About 'Modern-ness'" ("Guanyu 'xiandaixing' dushi suibi zhiyi"), *Fine Art (Meishu)*, Issue 3, 1982, 52-54.

Flowers Bloom' in Creative Works" in *Fine Art*, Issue Five of 1982. This article uses the official slogans to legitimize or modernist art.

We believe, if to recover and revive our art and literary tradition of realism means to restore the tight relationship between creative works and the real life, as well as to enhance the real-ness within the creative works, then the rationale behind the request to "recover and revive our art and literary tradition of realism" has nothing wrong. However, it is not necessarily accurate and rational, which will lead to confusion and misuse between theories and practices. If we understand the revival is to crown realism as the only legitimized and authorized technique and style, then we are to restrict and limit ourselves in a designated sphere. This will eventually do harm to the healthiness and prosperity in arts and literatures.¹⁰⁰

The second part of Mao Shian's article is titled "Rise of the Modernism," in which Mao calls the emergency of non-realist paintings "an earth-shattering breakthrough and revolution for Western Art," because they no longer rely on mimicry and made the emotional expression delivered more effectively.¹⁰¹ Mao Shian looks up in the 1979 edition of *Cihai*, the Chinese equivalence of the *Oxford Dictionary*, the term "*xiandai zhuyi*" (modernism) and refers to the given definition as "destruction of the fixed forms of arts and literatures" and "negation of the basic principles of artistic production."¹⁰² Mao points out that the very negative definition is derived from Andrei Zhdanov's criticism of "capitalist decadence in politics and bourgeoisie literature" at 1934 USSR Union of Writers.¹⁰³

The third part, titled "'A Hundred Flowers Blooming' in Realism, Modernism, and Other Methodologies," repudiates the corruptions of Modernism accused by the oppositional group. The first accused crime of modernism is the decadent world view. Unable to rehabilitate capitalism and the art born in the capitalist society, Mao claims that artistic production comes

¹⁰⁰ Mao Shian, "Realism and Modernism: A Discussion on '(How) to Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom' in Creative Works" ("*Xianshi zhuyi he xiandai zhuyi: guanyu chuanguozuo fangfa 'baihuaqifang' de taolun*"), *Fine Art (Meishu)*, Issue 1, 1982, 24.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 41

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 41.

from both real life experiences and creative practices, which are two processes often independent and relatively irrelevant to each other, so, despite capitalist decadency, the styles and working methodologies still hold concrete values within themselves. Meanwhile, Mao Shian writes that many modernist artists hold a more complicated and mixed world view which cannot be simply judged as being “counterrevolutionary.”¹⁰⁴ Secondly, modernist art is often accused as leaning toward formalism. Mao Shian exemplifies the Tang Dynasty calligrapher Zhang Xu to support his argument by saying that although oftentimes Zhang’s running scripts are hard to comprehend the content and even to identify each character, the dynamic and varying flows of the strokes present energy and *qi* (the circulation of breaths and energies). Mao Shian points out that, in contemporary China, instead of overemphasizing the forms and techniques, the artists and artisans lack practical options and even discussions on the issue. Thus, Mao Shian suggests that artists and artisans can at least pick up some specific methods in artistic production used in modernist art. Realizing that many opponents stem their objections from a traditionalist aesthetic preference and habitat, Mao Shian uses the slogan “to let a hundred flowers bloom” again to condemn. He writes, “If we decide to ‘let a hundred flowers bloom,’ we should not only have the ‘flower’ of realism which is favored by the majority, but also have the ‘flower’ of Modernism favored by the minority.... realism is probably the most popular ‘flower,’ but it is at most one kind of ‘flower.’” By saying this, Mao Shian passes the buck to the opponents by accusing them of going against Chairman Mao’s words and Deng Xiaoping’s doctrines. By doing this, Mao Shian smartly takes a moral high ground and a correct political ideological stance.¹⁰⁵

Following Mao Shian’s article, in the same issue, still gridded by the doctrines “to create all kinds of characters based on real life,” Li Xianting expresses his support to the new types of art

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 44.

seen at the exhibition in the article titled “Another Discussion on Realism Not to Be the Only Correct Way.”¹⁰⁶ Defining the terms of and discussing the misunderstood relationship among “real-ness,” “activeness,” and “methodologies” of creative works, Li Xianting comes up with the differences between the “reality” and “realism,” disputes the necessity of applying (socialist) realism in all genres, and therefore opens up space for non-realism to be legitimated within the ideological framework. Li first tackles the most stylistically and politically correct genre, the socialist realism and the revolutionary realism by arguing that “socialist realism” was created by the Soviet Union in a pseudo way to distinguish from the non-progressive and non-revolutionary realist works, while in China, “revolutionary realism” was born for a similar reason under a similar context. He writes, ironically, many works of this genre disobey the essence of “real-ness” and become cliché. Li exemplifies the countless versions of *With You in Charge, I Am at Ease* and says although they are all most strictly under the genre of “socialist realism,” they represent no “reality” because no one verifies nor witnesses the scene.¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, in the lasting popularity of the flower-and-bird genre, likeness is not the first priority because the more spiritual realm conveyed through the subjects matter. Therefore, realism is not necessarily superior to non-realism in this case. With the examples and counter-examples, Li concludes that realism and non-realism are equally important styling technics and drops a few names of non-realist masters to support his idea.

The Exhibition excited audiences, provoked lasting discussions and left strong imprints onto contemporary Chinese art and artists ever since. Many people shared Zha Li’s enthusiasm and

¹⁰⁶ Li Xianting, “Another Discussion on Realism Not to Be the Only Correct Way” (“Zaitan xianshizhuyi bushi weiyi zhengque de tujin”), *Fine Art (Meishu)*, Issue 1, 1982, 44-46.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

¹⁰⁸ The subject *With You in Charge, I am at Ease* has various versions. It usually depicts the old but healthy Mao Zedong mentoring the earnest-looking Hua Guofeng in a study room. However, it was one of these informal diplomatic events that Mao wrote in Hua’s notebook the words “With you in charge, I am at ease.” Andrews and Shen, *The Art of Modern China*, 202.

saw the exhibition as a hammer knocking and cracking an enclosed system, “Under this external force, cracks appear on the surface of the enclosed cultural system, from which flood from outside world inrushes – from then on, there is no chance for a U-turn in contemporary Chinese art.”¹⁰⁹ The post-Mao years in China appear to be a period of cultural vacuum – with the traditional being torn down and abandoned for more than a decade starting before the Cultural Revolution, and the foreign entirely blocked out and demonized, the only extant things, the revolutionary arts and literatures, went exhausted without the revolutionary campaigns. People inside the wall were keenly looking for things to fulfill the cultural space, which gave chance to cultural imports such as *The Exhibition* to become the center of attention and to be taken for granted. The substantial influences went on through the rest of the decade and after.

Chinese professional audiences’ reaction to abstract art— especially that of Jackson Pollock— reflected a fever over high culture and the Western Other. A cross cultural comparison helps explain the situation in China. Postwar Japan can sometimes be studied in a comparative context with post-Mao China. Like China, whose oil paintings and ink paintings, facing the powerful Western influence and weakening self-confidence in the global environment, the Japanese paintings are split into *nihonga* (Japanese-style paintings) and *yōga* (Western-style paintings). Japanese art critic Shūzō Takiguchi wrote a thought-provoking criticism “Calligraphy East and West” in 1957 in which the critic discusses how artists, such as Jackson Pollock, received influences from calligraphy and distanced themselves from calligraphy. He writes,

This modern-day Western ‘calligraphy’ differs substantially from Chinese or Japanese calligraphy, which originated for a base of ideographic signs and has only recently developed into a form of expression that has abandoned the written word. Western calligraphy, as a form of artistic expression, does not develop out of writing technique but rather seeks out of new or previously unknown signs

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

from within the paintings themselves. While the interplay of these two opposing courses reveals agreement on various points, it is also not unheard of for them to clash.

... The boundary between painting and calligraphy is a difficult problem, but to concern oneself too much with the boundary, just at the moment when calligraphy is released from the ideograph, can be further confining to the world of calligraphy.¹¹⁰

The similarity in form and even artists' practice is attention worthy and thus extensively discussed among Japanese critics when they first perceived the style and practice. However, their Chinese counterparts were so quick either to oppose or support Pollock's style that they could hardly think about cultural links embedded in their own culture, except for Mao Shian who very briefly mentions the Tang Dynasty calligrapher Zhang Xu to support Abstract Expressionism. Mao Shian exemplifies the Tang Dynasty calligrapher Zhang Xu to support his argument by saying that although oftentimes Zhang Xu's running scripts are hard to comprehend and individual characters are difficult to identify, the rhythm and variety of the strokes present energy and *qi* (the circulation of breaths and energies). In terms of cultural contacts and communications reflected in the two comparative cases, if Japan was able to realize the syncretic systems in which different origins were paralleled and each place could form its own center of cultural gravity, then China was simply diving into the game of globalization, whose center was by all means the First World countries, especially the United States.

The artist and cultural critic Chen Danqing describes the post-1976 period of China as “a person just recovering from a severe and sudden illness,” who is eager to eat anything possibly nutritious and take any possibly helpful suggestion unselectively and blindly in order to

¹¹⁰ Shūzō Takiguchi, “Calligraphy East and West,” in *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989*, ed. Doryn Chong, Michio Hayashi, Kenji Kajiya, Fumihiko Sumitomo (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 76-77.

accelerate and maximize his recovery.¹¹¹ The metaphor of the illness, etiology and patient was not invented by Chen Danqing. One can easily associate the metaphor with one of the most important stories or statements in modern Chinese literature, or culture – Lu Xun’s decision to give up his training in medical science and to become a writer because, according to Lu Xun, the physical illness of the Chinese patients are not as urgent to cure than the spiritual and cultural etiology.¹¹² Lu Xun, whose 100th anniversary overlapped the tournament of *The Exhibition*, called for people’s awareness of the nation’s weakness and provoked people’s willingness to catch up with other countries by modernizing China. Modernity with the foreign models, through grabbism or “principles of take-in” (*nalai zhuyi*) as suggested by Lu Xun, was the way to cure China as a patient 100 years ago. People in the 1980s would still remember the metaphor and lesson, through institutional education, official propagation, and literary works. Moreover, culturally speaking, China was culturally vacuumed and fractioned for a long time. It was a land of cultural void, which could not resist or even judge the imported culture with its own deeply-rooted and self-sustained cultures and civilizations. Therefore, China welcomed cultural occupations to fill the traumatic and shameful gap under the “principles of take-in” in order to recover, while the Americans were just as willing and ready to spread their permeating value systems.

If human civilization were developing along a singular path, and that path were the only correct option while the others were leading toward a dead end, then the Chinese would have

¹¹¹ Zha Jianyng, “An Interview with Chen Danqing,” in *The 1980s: A Collection of Interviews (Bashi Niandai Fangtanlu)*, (Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 2006), 102.

¹¹² “Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made materials or onlookers of such meaningless public exposures; and its doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at the time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement...” Lu Xun, “Preface to the First Collection of Short Stories, ‘Call to Arms,’” *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), 2-3.

admitted that the more economically advanced Western Others were ahead of China and thus ideally the present of the West were to be China's tomorrow. Recall Deng's "sole criterion" to decide the artists' and writers' correctness is that "whether that work is helpful or harmful to the accomplishment of the Four Modernizations," which is to say that artworks should participate in the modernization campaign actively in a positive way. But how to implement this accordingly? Deng did not give a clearly defined guide. As pointed out by Wang Jing, "In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the semantic core of 'modern consciousness' was composed of invigorating definitions such as 'self-reflexive consciousness and reform consciousness.'" ¹¹³ Therefore, on the path catching up with the West to achieve the Four Modernizations, the "modern consciousness" was to be carried in mind to constantly release oneself from the non-modern mindset and restrictions, and to transform oneself and the nation into the progressive, namely Westernized, new phase.

To abandon socialist realism and to embrace, or "grab" ¹¹⁴ the new styles and subjects into existence, the artists had to find a way to reject the former and domestic canon and to legitimize the new and foreign. Li Xianting gives his reason in "Another Discussion on Realism Not Being the Only Correct Way" - that the socialist realist paintings are not always showing the real things, while non-figurative paintings can be more real. Wang Jing theorizes the real versus the unreal in a modernist context by stating

Modernity, "in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities." Whereas Western modern art brings to bear an emancipatory potential directed against the excesses of technical and bureaucratic rationality, in post-Mao China, the historical burden of "modernist" artists and writers fell on

¹¹³ Wang Jing, "Mapping Aesthetic Modernity," *High Culture Fever*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 139.

¹¹⁴ This refers to Lu Xun's "grabbism."

their potential exposure of what was "unreal" about socialist reality and on their discovery and radicalizing of the private space of the subject ("the invention" of the real).¹¹⁵

The phenomenon of high culture fever further explains Chinese audiences' acceptance and appreciation of *The Exhibition*, while the concept of Occidentalism and self-conscious subversion delineates the reason why contemporary Chinese artists were eager to dismiss the orthodoxy trainings and styles and to dive into the newly imported trends. While Orientalism has been used by Western countries as the defined subaltern other to enhance and affirm their own value systems, Occidentalism has been also used in countries like China, but in a very different way. Chen Xiaomei asserts, "It was preconditioned by the parameters of Maoist political discourse, which categorized anything opposed to its political dominance as 'Westernized' or 'capitalized' for starting the Cultural Revolution, and for persecuting numerous intellectuals."¹¹⁶ After Mao's doctrines were turned down in a gradual and seemingly respectful way, Deng's doctrines actually did not give a clear guide and grid to follow and fit in. This was supposed to be good for creative works, or at least better than the previous decade, but the Chinese intellectuals were not entirely used to the openness and were lost in the lack of directions to some extent. Meanwhile, the rehabilitation of the previously persecuted "Westernized" or "capitalized" intellectuals, and the rise of the former "capitalist roader," Deng Xiaoping, who had been accused of introducing Western technology, opened up a new possible option for the intellectuals. To recognize the Western superiority, or to nominate the "Western Other" as the sole model to follow was not only to deny Mao's disastrous commands but also to show an anti-official attitude, which has been tightly associated with and helpful to establish ones' intellectual independence, or at least the name of being an independent thinker. Again, articulated by Chen

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 142-143.

¹¹⁶ Chen Xiaomei, 27.

Xiaomei, “Its (China’s) use of Occidentalism is thus a self-conscious subversion of the centrality of the official culture by moving into the very center of its own discourse a redefined and re-presented Western other,” and a way to fight “against the monolithic order of things at home.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 47-48.

Chapter 5: Aftermath and Conclusion: A Questionable Modernist Movement

The Exhibition received extraordinary viewership and thought-provoking deliberations. But its importance also be understood in terms of how it functioned – as the climax of cultural exchange between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the start of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983—which influenced the intellectual and ordinary life of people in China through the decade. This chapter seeks to push the discussion of art (and *The Exhibition*) further into a bigger context the intellectual movement in 1980s China.

Noticeably, although the terms “modern(-ness),” “modernity,” “modernism,” “contemporary,” and “avant-garde” are often used in the Chinese context to describe art and artists, the connotations are different from the European and American cases. This difference, which stems from the limited, if not totally wrong knowledge of the Western theories as well as works by some famous Marxist critics from Soviet Union, explains the frequent “wrong” uses of the terms. Art historian Gao Minglu points out, “In the Chinese indigenous context, we often refer to this temporality as ‘modernity.’ But this ‘modernity’ is not to be confused with ‘modernity’ in the Euro-American sense of that which comes between premodern and postmodern. Because in China, ‘modernity’ more often refers to the spirit of the times, not to a concrete span of historical time.”¹¹⁸ For instance, many exhibitions during the 1980s were under the titles XX (name of the group or the place) *Modern (Art) Exhibition*. As Gao Minglu explains, “The various uses of the term “avant-garde” by Chinese artists over the last two decades have already become a part of Chinese contemporary art history in and of itself. in the 1980s, the understanding of the Chinese

¹¹⁸ Gao Minglu, “Chinese Contemporary Art and Its Avant-Garde-ness,” in *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, (Beijing: China People’s University Press, 2006), 43.

artists was that modern is avant-garde, and vice-versa.”¹¹⁹ This interchangeability of “modern(ist)” and “avant-garde” was not purely invented by Chinese artists out of nowhere, but it was influenced by those Marxist critics dealing with avant-garde literature or art, who “preferred to characterize it as ‘modernist’ (a word that they used to oppose to ‘realist’ or ‘socialist realist,’ and that had acquired for them definitely negative connotations) or ‘decadent’ ...”¹²⁰ Also, because in order to avoid confusions, the Soviet critics never employed word “avant-garde” for its original connotation as political propaganda to publicize ideologies,¹²¹ thus only the implication of radicalism and function to “condemn the ‘official’ culture of their time, with all its aesthetic and other taboos” were recognized and acknowledged by Chinese artists.¹²²

The fever over the Western Other and the self-subversive Occidentalism partially led to a “Modernism Movement” full of special features applicable only in the Chinese context. First, unlike their European modernist predecessors and counterparties who developed sub-movements and schools of arts and thoughts, the Chinese avant-garde artists during the decade borrowed and experimented on the existing styles: impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, primitivism,

¹¹⁹ “The various uses of the term ‘avant-garde’ by Chinese artists over the last two decades have already become a part of Chinese contemporary art history in and of itself. In the 1980s, the understanding of the Chinese artists was that modern is avant-garde, and vice-versa. At the same time, there were a number of other words in use such as ‘new wave,’ ‘new realism,’ and ‘new primitivism.’ ‘Modern’ was a major word of the artists of the 1980s. A great number of avant-garde artistic groups in that period used the word ‘modern’ in the names of their exhibitions and groups. For example, ‘Xiamen Dada,’ although it was a postmodern concept, still used the word *xiandai* in the title of the exhibitions in 1985 and 1986. The moment when art critics and artists formally and consistently start using the term ‘avant-garde’ is from *the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in Beijing in February 1989. However, the English and Chinese titles of the exhibition are different. The English title of *China/Avant-Garde* was translated from the original Chinese title *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan*, which in English literally means ‘Chinese Modern Art Exhibition.’ This is because for Chinese artists, as well as for the organizers, it would have been vulgar to use ‘xiandai yishu’ or ‘modern art’ as a definition with which to introduce the new Chinese art movement of the 1980s to Western artists and critics. Modern art for a Western audience would mean the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century. But in the Chinese context, ‘modern’ and ‘avant-garde’ were the same thing.”
Ibid., 44.

¹²⁰ Matei Calinescu, “The Idea of the Avant-Garde,” in *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 115.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 117.

cubism, fauvism, and all other schools one could name – maybe an adaptation of Lu Xun’s “grabbism.” However, many artists could only borrow them formally; they treated these imported schools as frames in which they could fit whatever was non-traditional and non-Chinese. Second, as Clement Greenberg points out: the avant-garde movement in Europe and America goes from pure avant-garde to popular avant-garde.¹²³ In the Chinese case, the tendency was reversed. One reason for such reserved direction might be quick swallowing of the Western influx and the slow digesting of the swallowed. In the European and American case, it went from a small pool of elite intellectuals to the public, while in the Chinese case, it was widely spread among whoever had access to the imported materials and then shrinks to the “true artists.” In other words, it started like a campaign, or a revolution to turn over the past doctrine and its visual representation.

The art movement or art environment during the 1980s, although being called avant-garde, is more or less recycled from the West in terms of forms, expressions and even content as well as ideas. An Italian critic once commented on the '89 *China Avant-Garde Exhibition* by saying that what has impressed her most is the déjà vu she felt viewing the artworks. For instance, among the very famous and relatively sophisticated works, Tan Ping’s oil painting *Cloud* (1985) clearly reminds audiences of surrealist arts starting from the 1920s; Zeng Xisheng’s *Pigeon* (1985) is orthodoxy cubism; Liu Yan’s *Alta* (1986) does not hesitate to show connections with Dali. In the documentary film *From Jean-Paul Satre to Teresa Teng: Cantonese Contemporary Art in the 1980s* produced by Hong Kong based Asian Art Archive, Yang Jiechang says, “So when I

¹²³ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde Attitudes," The John Power Lecture in Contemporary Art Delivered At The University Of Sydney, May 17 1968, accessed February 10, 2015, <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/avantgarde.html>.

graduated in 1982, the first thing I did was to experiment with these styles.”¹²⁴ “These styles” refer to Jackson Pollock’s Abstraction Expressionism. However, Yang Jiechang later developed his own style out of Pollock’s shadow and became known for his abstract ink paintings. Unlike their Euro-American predecessors, the Chinese contemporary avant-garde artists received the “final products” without participating in the developmental stages.

The intellectual movement went from popular avant-garde to pure avant-garde, a reversed order compared to the avant-garde movements in Euro-America. In the past, governments and religions are main patrons of art. However, in modern societies, previous patrons break down, which causes ideological struggles.¹²⁵ This is described in Stebbins’ article and perfectly fit China’s situation in art at the time when the traditional was destroyed and Mao’s guides were losing power. In *Avant-Garde and Attitudes* presented in 1968, Greenberg realizes and introduces the so-called “popular avant-garde.”¹²⁶ It describes the phenomenon that turnovers of new schools and trends are extremely rapid and abrupt. It is easy for innovations to enter, at the cost of a possible sudden death. The existence of art relies on “empirical phenomena,” “aesthetically arbitrary objects or facts.”¹²⁷ There exists “avant-gardism” which contributes to the simplicity and superficiality of the new “popular avant-garde” arts. In the short period of four or five years, there were eighty-seven avant-garde artist groups being formed throughout the country from coastal areas to Tibet and Inner Mongolia ... ;these groups held more than one hundred and fifty events with more than 2250 artists participating.¹²⁸ Therefore, with the

¹²⁴ *From Jean-Paul Sartre to Teresa Teng: Cantonese Contemporary Art in the 1980s*, Directed and Produced by Asian Art Archive (Hong Kong: Asian Art Archive, 2009)

¹²⁵ Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kistch." *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Francis Frascina ed., (Routledge: 2000), 21-34.

¹²⁶ Greenberg, Clement, “Avant-Garde and Attitude.”

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Minglu Gao, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, (Beijing: China People's University Press, 2006), 30.

imported styles as frames, and imported thoughts as contents, young artists created their own domain which was definitely far away from the much more familiar contexts. Based on these two prerequisites, the young artists started the movement.

Another feature which differentiates the “popular avant-garde” from the “pure avant-garde” is the way in which the artists convey their concept into artworks. There is the trend going from illustrating the conceptions to evoking thoughts among audiences. To illustrate, one seeks a one-way communication, and begs for recognition, while to evoke, one seeks information exchanges and other thoughtful minds. Therefore, the viewership shrinks and becomes more elite and enclosed. For example, the Northern Art Group was one of the most prevailing art groups in the intellectual movement. The group members, such as Wang Guangyi and Shu Qun, used large number of Christian symbols, geometric forms and colors in cool tones to illustrate an ideal world of “western rationality.” For example, in Wang Guangyi depicts the *Neo-classical Series: Matthew* in 1985. The composition is symmetrical, which refers to the pursuit of rationality; the two no-faced figures dress like priests, a sign of western civilization. Other examples are like Shu Qun’s *Absolute Principle: No.1* (1985). Same here, crucifixion and geometries are seen. Neither of them is religious, but their applications of religious symbols just show an intention of teaching. Using the religious symbols of the “Western Other” as an indicator of rationality to be pursued and followed in the new era of China reflected the “avant-gardism” which fantasized the imported culture and turned it into a cult.

Today, more than thirty years have passed since *The Exhibition*. The marketization and commercialization movements during the 1990s have diminished the “personality” China developed in 1980s, which was highly collective, (still) extremely revolutionary, eager and willing to learn, ideal, lost, curious and even innocent. Many people hold nostalgia to the decade

and call it China's cultural renaissance, while other people bitterly and ironically regard it as a brief relief of a long-term maltreatment. Through the lens of *The Exhibition*, we see political wrestling domestically and internationally, sense the artistic environment and atmosphere at the time, notice how power relations function in cultural contact and diplomatic communications, and experience the sequence of the opening-up and cultural exchanges today. Not only love of art but also American patriotism, idealism, and cultural nationalism brought *The Exhibition* to fruition. Most importantly, a cultural contact zone was mediated via *The Exhibition*. In this cultural contact zone, the encountering of two cultures was bridged through an unequal power relation. Wrapped in the form of an art exhibition, the United States effectively conveyed her self-representation and autoethnography to the Chinese audiences. Experiencing a cultural vacuum, needs for reforms, and lack of clear guidance, the Chinese professional audiences, namely the artists, art critics, and art students showed a fever over high culture and Occidentalism involving self-subversion. Under the cultural influx, a very China-specific and time-specific "Modernist" Movement occurred.

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